



HAVING
Too
MUCH

PHILOSOPHICAL
ESSAYS ON
LIMITARIANISM

EDITED BY
INGRID ROBEYNS

HAVING TOO MUCH

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Philosophical Essays on Limitarianism

Edited by Ingrid Robeyns



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Table of Contents

Preface	viii
<i>Ingrid Robeyns</i>	
1. Introducing the Philosophy of Limitarianism	1
<i>Ingrid Robeyns</i>	
2. Having Too Much	15
<i>Ingrid Robeyns</i>	
3. Limits to Wealth in the History of Western Philosophy	61
<i>Matthias Kramm and Ingrid Robeyns</i>	
4. Autonomy-Based Reasons for Limitarianism	91
<i>Danielle Zwarthoed</i>	
5. Limitarianism: Pattern, Principle, or Presumption?	129
<i>Dick Timmer</i>	
6. The Limits of Limitarianism	151
<i>Robert Huseby</i>	
7. Why Limitarianism?	175
<i>Ingrid Robeyns</i>	
8. Presumptive Limitarianism: A Reply to Robert Huseby	203
<i>Dick Timmer</i>	
9. Sufficiency, Limits, and Multi-Threshold Views	219
<i>Colin Hickey</i>	
10. A Neo-Republican Argument for Limitarianism	247
<i>Elena Icardi</i>	
11. The Self-Respect Argument for Limitarianism	271
<i>Christian Neuhäuser</i>	

12. Climate Change, Distributive Justice, and “Pre-Institutional” Limits on Resource Appropriation	297
<i>Colin Hickey</i>	
13. Ecological Limits: Science, Justice, Policy, and the Good Life	335
<i>Fergus Green</i>	
14. Limitarianism and Future Generations	361
<i>Tim Meijers</i>	
Contributor Biographies	391
Index	395

Preface

Ingrid Robeyns

This is the first volume that brings together philosophical papers on limitarianism—the view that it is not permissible to have more than a certain upper limit of resources. Or, put colloquially, the view that there are moral limits to how rich a person can be, or how many other types of scarce and valuable resources they can appropriate.

There is a lot of interest in these issues in society. That is not surprising, since in many countries the media are paying more attention to the increasing gap between the best-off and the rest of society. While in recent years most people have experienced more difficult times—first because of the increasing effects of climate change, then because of the Covid-19 pandemic, and most recently because of rising energy prices due to the Russian war in Ukraine—the position of the richest in society has not been negatively affected. While everyone else is experiencing a stagnation or decline in their living standards, the richest are getting richer.

Due to this widespread societal interest and the fact that this book is published open access, members from a general readership might pick up this book. However, this is not a book written for a broader audience. This is a book in which academic philosophers present their research to their colleagues and advanced students; it presupposes at least some training in (analytical) political philosophy, and for most chapters also a good understanding of contemporary political philosophy. The broader audience might find more accessible arguments on the moral problems with excessive wealth in Neuhäuser (2018) and on limitarianism specifically in Robeyns (2024).

In putting together this volume, I have been very lucky to work with a wonderful group of contributors. I thank Matthias Kramm, Danielle Zwarthoed, Robert Huseby, Dick Timmer, Colin Hickey and Fergus Green for granting permission to reprint their earlier published articles. In addition, Dick Timmer, Colin Hickey, Elena Icardi, Christian Neuhäuser and Tim Meijers enthusiastically wrote new papers for the volume. As former members of the Fair Limits project, which ran at Utrecht University from 2018 until the end of 2022, Dick, Colin, Fergus and Tim also served as a great group of advisors on various editorial decisions that had to be made. It has been a real pleasure to work with them on the Fair Limits project, and I am delighted that we can close it with this collective publication.

Unfortunately, limited resources forced me to make a choice in which earlier published articles on limitarianism to reprint, and many fine articles could not be included. But they are mentioned in the Introduction, and some of those papers are discussed in more depth in certain chapters. I hope this volume will thus serve as a useful introduction to the philosophical literature on limitarianism, and allow interested readers to find their way to additional articles.

A book is always a project to which many people contributed, not just by providing chapters but also in other ways. I would like to thank the two referees of the volume—who were first anonymous, but later turned out to be Tammy Harel Ben Sahar and Alexandru Volacu. They provided very helpful comments on the new chapters and did so in a very short time frame. In addition, thanks also to Morten Fibieger Byskov and Adelin-Costin Dumitru for providing anonymous referee reports on one particular chapter, as well as many other colleagues who provided comments on various chapters. They are thanked in the acknowledgements of those specific chapters. Thanks also to Bart Mijland, who was the practical coordinator of the Fair Limits team for most of the duration of the project, and to Emma Hulsbos who provided some editorial assistance in the early stages of the work on this volume. I would also like to thank the editorial team at Open Book Publishers, in particular OBP's director Alessandra Tosi; Melissa Purkiss, Mark Harris and Lucy Barnes for their editing work; and Jeevan Nagpal for the cover design. Thanks also to Roland Pierik for providing us with a picture for

the cover. The cover picture symbolizes the view that the sky is the limit, which limitarianism rejects.

This edited volume will be published both in English and in Spanish translation. For the Spanish translation, I am grateful to Iñaki Larrínaga Márquez, who spent countless hours translating all these philosophical papers into Spanish. I hope that many Spanish-speaking readers will enjoy the fruits of his efforts.

Finally, the financial support for by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 726153) is gratefully acknowledged.

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1. Introducing the Philosophy of Limitarianism

Ingrid Robeyns

1. The Basic Intuition of Limitarianism

We are all familiar with the many reasons why we should fight poverty. Poor people do not have enough money to meet their basic needs, are excluded from society, are often not given proper respect, or can become easy prey at the hands of others who want to dominate them. In the domains of both material and immaterial goods, there is a widespread understanding about what it means when someone is deprived, that is, when they do not have enough important goods such as income, wealth, power, authority, water, food, housing, or energy. Virtually everyone, regardless of their political persuasion, agrees that every person should have access to enough of what matters.

If the claim is made that we should, if possible, avoid poverty, it is often made as a moral claim which suggests that poverty is bad or wrong (some non-altruistic persons might only endorse it as an instrumental claim, for example because they only care about physical security and stability, and hope that eradicating poverty will avoid their being confronted with pitchforks). We could make it into a political claim by saying that our social institutions should be designed to avoid poverty to the extent that this is feasible (and some might add to the extent that avoiding poverty does not come at a greater loss of other values that matter).

But can we also say that there are situations in which someone *has too much*? And what reasons are there to worry about someone having too much? These are the questions that are central to the limitarian project.

This is not merely a question that is relevant for political philosophers. In society at large, there are many instances when citizens or commentators argue that some people are taking, receiving, or acquiring too much. The fortunes of the richest billionaires have become so inconceivably large that journalists, activists, and artists are trying to come up with ways to visualize them so as to make them comprehensible. For example, the Forbes World's Billionaires List 2022 estimates that the biggest fortune of an individual is \$251 billion, that is \$251,000,000,000—owned at some point during 2022 by Elon Musk. Just try to compare that with, for example, \$40,000, which is the average wage of a production worker at Tesla (Musk's largest company). But there is also moral and political outrage about the financial holdings of much less wealthy persons, such as those of CEOs in Europe who earn several million euros each year—including directors of banks that had to be saved in the financial crises of 2018—or of fossil fuel companies such as Shell that are criticized for slowing down the deep decarbonization so badly needed to keep the planet habitable for humans. Some multi-millionaires, however, have organized themselves, in groups such as the Patriotic Millionaires, and are engaging in political activism that aims to decrease economic inequalities by making the superrich pay more taxes.

Limitarianism says that at some point of earning or accumulating, one has too much. The view is that no-one should have more than a certain upper limit of some goods or resources that are scarce and valuable. The most widely examined of those goods is money—either in the form of income or in the form of wealth. But limitarianism is also applicable to other valuable scarce goods, such as the services that ecosystems give to human beings or the capacity of the atmosphere to absorb greenhouse gases.

This volume brings together state-of-the-art philosophical debate on limitarianism by presenting articles that have already been published alongside some new work on the topic.¹ The idea that one can have

1 It has been impossible to be complete, and some important and fine articles had to be left out, such as those by Volacu and Dumitru (2019), Timmer (2019), Alí and Caranti (2021), Caranti and Alí (2021), and Dumitru (2020). See also the paper by Harel Ben Shahar (2019), which is unpublished but has already been cited multiple

too much may sound weird to those raised with neoliberal values in contemporary capitalist societies, but it has been argued for by many thinkers in the past. More than 2000 years ago, Plato argued in *The Laws* that in the ideal polis there would be neither destitution nor great affluence, because if either of these existed, the city would be subjected to civil war. He therefore proposes that ownership should not be more than four times the poverty limit at most (Plato 2016, 744e). As Matthias Kramm and I have shown in our helicopter view of Western political philosophy,² there have been thinkers from a variety of traditions who have argued for upper limits to the acquisition and possession of wealth or to consumption (the latter generally presupposes but does not imply the former). Still, arguments in contemporary Western political philosophy often take different forms to past arguments. In particular, past arguments often relied on virtue ethics and an identification of the ethical with the political, whereas contemporary arguments are generally grounded in a form of political philosophy that tries to steer clear of moral judgements about character and personal choices made outside the public domain.

I coined the term ‘limitarianism’ in a paper I started developing in 2012 and which was ultimately published in the 2017 NOMOS annual yearbook of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy (Knight and Schwartzberg 2017). That paper is reprinted here as Chapter 2. Others were working on similar ideas; most strikingly, Christian Neuhäuser (2018) published an entire book on the moral problems of wealth concentration (in German) without either of us knowing about each other’s work. In the last five years, a small but fast-growing literature has emerged on this topic. I was particularly fortunate to be awarded a Consolidator Grant by the European Research Council, which allowed a larger team of political theorists and philosophers to work on the questions of limits in the appropriation of ecological and economic resources. The development of this small area of literature was also aided by several workshops and conferences devoted to scholarly discussions on limitarianism.³ This volume aims to bring together those

times, as well as the monograph by Neuhäuser (2018) and the PhD dissertation by Timmer (2021a).

2 Reprinted here as Chapter 3.

3 This includes, in particular, a workshop on principles of distributive justice in Utrecht (January 2019) organized by the Fair Limits team; the inaugural Bucharest

key published articles, as well as several novel arguments. And since this volume will be published in English as well as in Spanish translation, it will make these texts more easily available to students and scholars from two large academic language communities.

2. Aims of this Volume

This volume has three core aims.

The first is to provide a state-of-the-art discussion about limitarianism—to the extent that this is possible when there is a rapidly evolving literature.⁴ As not all of the book chapters that previously appeared as articles were published via open access, one goal of this volume is to make more articles on limitarianism accessible to all. Since this volume also serves as the final collective publication of the Fair Limits project, our selection of reprinted articles has focussed on articles published within the framework of that project.

Chapter 2 is a reprint of the chapter “Having Too Much” in which limitarianism was introduced (Robeyns 2017). Chapter 3 is a reprint of Kramm and Robeyns (2020), in which we provided a brief overview of what one could consider ‘predecessors’ of limitarianism in the history of Western philosophy. Clearly this overview is not complete, and not only because it leaves out the histories of the various non-Western philosophies. For example, Eric Schliesser has argued that Spinoza should be read as endorsing a qualified form of limitarianism in his account of the ideal monarchy that he wrote in the seventeenth century (Schliesser 2021). Another example that Schliesser (2022) found is L.T. Hobhouse, who made explicit limitarian claims in his 1911 book *Liberalism*. We can expect that increased discussion of this topic will uncover more historical thinkers who have made limitarian claims.

Conference in Analytical Political Theory on the topic of “Thresholds in Justice: Sufficientarianism and Limitarianism revisited” (June 2019), organized by Alexandru Volacu and colleagues; and a workshop on limitarianism in Dortmund (November 2019) organized by Christian Neuhäuser and Dick Timmer.

4 In the final stages of this project, Dick Timmer and Christian Neuhäuser (2022) published a symposium of *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* on limitarianism, and Lisa Herzog (forthcoming) wrote a paper on liberal egalitarianism that draws out implications for limitarianism. Limitarianism is also defended in the new book by Tom Malleon (2023).

Chapter 4 is a reprint of Danielle Zwarthoed's article "Autonomy-based Reasons for Limitarianism", which argues that in order to protect the moral autonomy of persons, a society needs to put a limit on how rich a person can be (Zwarthoed 2019). Chapter 5 is a reprint of Dick Timmer's article "Limitarianism: Pattern, Principle or Presumption" in which he analyses precisely what kind of principle limitarianism is (or could be), and in which he defends limitarianism as a mid-level principle as well as on presumptive grounds (Timmer 2021b). Chapters 6 and 7 are reprints of a two-paper symposium recently published in *The Journal of Political Philosophy* in which Robert Huseby (2022) argued that limitarianism is superfluous because it can be reduced either to sufficientarianism or to egalitarianism. In the second paper (Robeyns 2022), I responded to those objections and also further clarified the idea of limitarianism (see also Section 3 of this Introduction). I also endorsed the claim that was recently explicitly defended by Liam Shields (2020) in the context of sufficientarianism, and which builds on earlier arguments by John Roemer (2004), that we should move towards hybrid or multi-principled accounts of distributive justice, which was indeed Rawls' own theory of justice (Rawls 1971). The reasons for combining sufficientarian thresholds with limitarian thresholds in a full account of social or distributive justice are further developed in Colin Hickey's new paper in this volume (Chapter 9).

In his paper, Huseby also criticizes the presumptive argument for limitarianism advanced by Timmer (reprinted here in Chapter 5). In Chapter 8 of this volume, "Presumptive Limitarianism: A Reply to Robert Huseby", Dick Timmer responds to Huseby's critique by partly revising and further clarifying his defence of presumptive limitarianism.

The second aim of this volume is to advance *novel arguments* in this debate. In Chapter 9, "Sufficiency, Limits, and Multi-threshold Views", Colin Hickey argues that there are good reasons for sufficientarians to also endorse limitarianism and for limitarians to endorse sufficientarianism. He also offers some speculative thoughts on a necessary conceptual connection between the two. He closes the chapter by explaining why we should not be surprised that most plausible accounts of distributive justice are multi-threshold views containing at least one sufficientarian and one limitarian threshold.

In Chapter 10, “A Neo-republican Argument for Limitarianism”, Elena Icardi analyzes whether neo-republicans should endorse limitarianism, and if so, which form. She argues that since freedom as non-domination is grounded on citizens having an equal opportunity for political influence, and since this equality is jeopardized both by the fact that the super-rich enjoy greater opportunities and by the fact that formal institutional constraints can only prevent it to a minimal extent, neo-republicanism should endorse a limitarian threshold. However, unlike Adelin Costin Dumitru (2020), Icardi holds that such a threshold should be imposed in those places where the wealthy dominate democracy because of their wealth, rather than where they possess more resources than they need to fully flourish.

In Chapter 11, Christian Neuhäuser provides a novel reason for limitarianism, which is based on the notion of self-respect as a primary basic good. He argues that limitarianism is needed to protect the self-respect of all members of society so that they can develop a sense of self-worth and enjoy the freedom to pursue their own ideas of the good life and the projects that this entails. This implies, Neuhäuser argues, that Rawls’ theory of justice should endorse limitarianism, either by interpreting the difference principle in a way that includes an upper threshold, or else by adding it as an additional principle.

The volume’s third aim is to bring the philosophical analysis of upper limits to wealth and the analysis of upper limits on the use of ecological resources closer together. Limitarianism need not be restricted to questions of wealth alone, and could also be considered in relation to questions about the use of ecological resources.

Chapter 12 is a reprint of Colin Hickey’s (2021) article “Climate Change, Distributive Justice and ‘Pre-institutional’ Limits on Resources Appropriation”, in which he argues that pre-institutional limits on the use of the absorption capacity of the atmosphere can be justified on the basis of several ethical theories. Chapter 13 is a reprint of Fergus Green’s article in which he looks at the question of limits in the sphere of ecological resources in a non-ideal and institutional setting (Green 2021). Finally, in Chapter 14, Tim Meijers turns to future generations and asks two questions. First, do we have reasons relating to intergenerational justice to support economic limitarianism understood as limits to current wealth? He argues that if we owe future generations just institutions, we have reasons to prevent the entrenchment of wealth and to prevent

future inequalities. Second, if we move beyond economic limitarianism and also look at ecological limits, what would a limitarian view that takes concerns about future generations as a starting point look like?

3. Some Key Developments in the Literature

It is not surprising that when an idea is put forward and defended, the conceptualization of the idea itself, as well as possible reasons for the view, change in response to further discussions and critiques. In my response to Huseby (2022), I have already pointed out some of those changes, and I would like to use this opportunity to highlight one important change in particular and explain the background that motivates it.

When I started writing about limitarianism in 2012, I was initially motivated by two questions. First, can one plausibly draw the opposite of a poverty line, that is, a line representing an amount of material resources such that one has more than one needs for a maximally flourishing life? And second, what reasons could there be for the claim that the money above that line should be redistributed to others or used to deal with problems which, if solved, would improve the flourishing of those who are worse off? Answers to these questions came in the form of the account of riches (Robeyns 2017: 14–30) and the argument from unmet urgent needs (Robeyns 2017: 10–14) that I provided. The account of riches and the objections to that account are indeed a large part of this paper and were developed first. When I further developed the paper in late 2013 and early 2014, I came to realize (no doubt through discussions with interlocutors) that the threat to political equality might be at least as important a reason to object to excessive wealth concentration, and therefore I added the democratic argument as a second argument for limitarianism. However, I did not ask at the time whether the riches line—the level at which a person is fully flourishing and cannot spend more money to improve her flourishing (if we use a political and purely materialist account of flourishing)—is also the proper upper limit that is sufficient for protecting the value of political equality. Discussions within the Fair Limits team and among the participants at a workshop in Utrecht in January 2019 made it clear that the different underlying values that limitarianism aims to protect might require different limitarian thresholds, and that some of those thresholds should be relative, rather

than absolute (this was Plato's view, too, when he argued that the upper limit of ownership should be no more than four times what the poorest have). At the time of writing this Introduction, several papers have been published that argue for relative thresholds, on either conceptual or normative grounds (Harel Ben Shahar 2019; Ali and Caranti 2021; Caranti and Ali 2021; Timmer 2021a; see also the chapter by Icardi in this volume).

While I still think that the right conceptualization of riches (that is, the concept that signifies the symmetrical opposite of poverty) is an absolute threshold and can plausibly be called 'the riches line', I agree that the riches line is only one of several possible limitarian thresholds. Similarly, while the money above the riches line that a rich person has can still be called 'surplus money' or 'surplus wealth' (i.e., money she cannot use to flourish in the specific sense outlined above), the more general term for money above the limitarian threshold is 'excess wealth' or 'excess money' (Robeyns 2022: 253–254). This broadening and generalization of the conceptual building blocks of limitarianism are not only needed to give the democratic argument its due, but also allow for a wider range of limitarian theories to be developed and investigated.

Another development in the literature is that it is now obvious that there is a wide range of reasons for limitarianism. The first two reasons were the argument for unmet urgent needs, which is essentially a modification of the utilitarian argument proposed by scholars such as Peter Singer (1972), and the democratic argument, which aims to protect political equality understood as equal political influence. Daniel Zwarthoed (2019) added an argument based on moral autonomy; Christian Neuhäuser (2018) added an argument based on human dignity; Neuhäuser (2018) and Robeyns (2019) added ecological reasons for limitarianism; and Dumitru (2020) and Icardi (this volume) developed arguments based on republican freedom. Moreover, several theorists argued that limitarianism should work with relative thresholds, rather than an absolute threshold (e.g. Harel Ben Shahar 2019, Ali and Caranti 2021; Caranti and Ali 2021). In so far as different political theories often have one master value to which they give lexical priority over other values, one might ask whether there is widespread agreement concerning limitarianism in different political theories, albeit that different theorists would endorse it for different reasons.

This would certainly be a strength of the view, especially with respect to policy recommendations and the design of institutions.

4. Future Directions

The papers in this volume already raise a number of questions for further research. But there are additional questions that have been raised while various scholars have worked on this topic over the years. I will discuss a few in this section, or enough to show that these questions are diverse and give rise to a significant research agenda, but I do not aim to provide an exhaustive overview.

First, it will be vital for philosophers to know whether limitarianism is merely a moral view without institutional implications (and hence not a political view), or whether it is a political view, or a combination of the two. If it is a combination, what exactly would such a combination look like?⁵

Second, various arguments have been offered in the literature in favour of limitarian thresholds being either absolute or relative. In the paper in which limitarianism was introduced, I defended an absolute threshold, but as I explain in the previous section, this was motivated by my project of developing a riches line. This is, in my view, the proper limitarian threshold for the unmet urgent needs argument (although it is worth stressing that this doesn't exhaust all duties to meet such needs, and that there are very good arguments for why those below the riches line also have certain duties, albeit possibly less stringent ones). Yet several philosophers have, rightly in my view, argued that the democratic argument, which focusses on avoiding material domination in the political sphere, needs a relative threshold (Harel Ben Shahr 2019; Ali and Caranti 2021; Caranti and Ali 2021). In a forthcoming paper, Lisa Herzog offers another reason for a relative threshold as a way to take into account the potentially negative effects of positional goods (Herzog forthcoming). Thus, in principle, thresholds could be either absolute or relative, and different reasons for limitarianism give

5 I develop the view that, in the current deeply inegalitarian and nonideal world, limitarianism should be a combination of ethical (personal) claims and moral-political claims in my forthcoming book (to be published early 2024 by Allen Lane (UK) and Astra House (USA)).

rise to different thresholds (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019; Timmer 2021a). The exact reasons for when thresholds should be relative and when they should be absolute, and whether hybrid options are possible, require further thought.

Third, as long as one only endorses one reason for limitarianism, one might not need to bother with multiple thresholds; but what if one endorses multiple reasons for limitarianism, which lead to multiple thresholds? Things might get even more complicated if some of these multiple thresholds are absolute and some are relative. This raises new issues. One new question it raises is what the relationship is between those thresholds, and whether there are possible conflicts between them. Another issue is how, if there are trade-offs between the goals of staying below several separate limitarian thresholds, we should analyse and respond to those trade-offs. Recently, Dick Timmer (2021c) has advanced our conceptual understanding of what constitutes a threshold in theories of distributive justice and has explained why thresholds in accounts of distributive justice do not need to be arbitrary. But more work in this area is needed, including at the level of normative analysis. One other possible line of investigation is whether the question of the moral versus the political nature of limitarianism can be put to work to solve any possible conflicts between multiple limitarian thresholds.

Fourth, how exactly should we determine those thresholds? What are appropriate methods for doing so? Is this something that philosophers can do on their own (I suspect not), and if not, do philosophers have to take into account the research constraints of the empirical sciences with which they are collaborating? Is it methodologically sound to elicit a riches line (hence a threshold that is absolute and based on flourishing or quality of life), that is based on a survey of vignettes, as was done by an interdisciplinary team at Utrecht University?⁶ Or should this only be done with focus groups and should one still use other methods, for example letting participating citizens use something like Lego bricks to build their ideal wealth distribution, as was done by a team based at the LSE in London?⁷ And how can we estimate the upper limits when the reason for limitarianism is not meeting urgent needs but rather protecting democracy, or another reason altogether?

6 See Robeyns, Buskens, Van de Rijt, Vergeldt, and van der Lippe (2021).

7 See Davis et al. (2020); for a very interesting methodological reflection by this team, see Summers et al. (2022).

Fifth, in so far as we are interested in limitarianism as a contribution to theorizing about distributive justice, it is crystal clear that it only provides part of an account of distributive justice. This raises the question of what a (more) complete account of distributive justice, which includes one or more upper thresholds, would look like. Building on the work of John Roemer (2004), Liam Shields (2020) argues for a pluralistic theory of distributive justice, which consists of lexically ordered distributive principles and also allows for a plurality of currencies of justice. As Shields rightly points out, Rawls' theory of justice contains both multiple principles and multiple metrics. If limitarianism is to play any role in a theory of distributive justice, the question is what role it would play in such a combination of principles and currencies.

Sixth, if limitarian principles are proposed not just for one valuable scarce good—such as money—but for multiple goods, for example if we add goods such as our use of the capacity of the atmosphere to absorb greenhouse gasses, then additional issues arise. An important question is what effect a limitarian threshold in one distributive metric has on distributive principles in another metric. A concrete and extremely relevant example is the question of what the implications are of a limitarian principle in the domain of ecological resources for questions concerning distributive justice in the domain of money, and vice versa.

Seventh, there is much more work to be done on the policy implications of limitarianism. Philosophers often think of policy implications as elements that are clean and neat (e.g. changing the tax rates), but it seems much more likely that limitarian goals can only be reached via a more comprehensive plan consisting of several measures that stand in a particular relation to each other. For example, if we want to increase taxation on capital, we might first have to close international tax havens, or take other measures, as a precondition that aims to avoid a massive level of international tax mobility.

Finally, there are many objections one might raise to limitarianism, both at the purely conceptual level and at the substantive-normative level. Some of the papers cited in this chapter, as well as in the symposium edited by Timmer and Neuhäuser (2022) have formulated objections to limitarianism. But clearly much more work is needed on this front too—not just by formulating objections, but also by analysing them.

5. Concluding Remarks

This volume aims to advance philosophical scholarship on limitarianism. It tries to do so by bringing together and making more widely accessible some core earlier publications on limitarianism, as well as by presenting novel work on the subject. The current state of the world underscores the need to take limits to the appropriation of resources seriously: national income and wealth inequalities are at the highest levels in decades and the richest have never been so rich before; the debilitating effects of these problems on democratic structures and practices can no longer be denied; and the disproportionately negative effect of the consumption patterns of the rich on climate change is growing. We thus must ask whether there is a point at which someone has too much. It is our hope that, with this volume, we can make a scholarly contribution to this much-needed debate.

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2. Having Too Much

Ingrid Robeyns

1. Introduction

Whatever else contemporary theories of distributive justice take a stance on, they always specify a metric of justice and a distributive rule.¹ The metric is concerned with the good X whose distribution matters insofar as justice is concerned. Among the most influential metrics are welfare, resources, primary goods, and capabilities. The distributive rule specifies how X should be distributed; prime examples are the principles of priority, sufficiency, equality of outcomes, equality of opportunity, and Rawls's difference principle.

This chapter articulates and defends a view of distributive justice that I call *limitarianism*. In a nutshell, limitarianism advocates that it is not morally permissible to have more resources than are needed to fully flourish in life. Limitarianism views having riches or wealth to be the state in which one has more resources than are needed for maximally flourishing in life, and claims that, in such a case, one has too much, morally speaking.²

Limitarianism is only a partial account of distributive justice, since it can be specified in a way in which it is agnostic regarding what distributive justice requires for those who are not maximally flourishing. It could, for example, be combined with one of the many versions of equality of opportunity below the limitarian threshold. The version of limitarianism that I defend here is not agnostic as to what happens

1 Anderson (2010, 81).

2 I will use the terms "wealth" and "riches" synonymously in this chapter.

below the line of riches; but, as I will point out in Section II, there are several different versions of limitarianism, and different versions may have different views on what morality requires below the line of riches.

In this chapter I defend limitarianism as a non-ideal doctrine. I postpone the question of whether limitarianism could be defended as an ideal theory for future work. Analyzing limitarianism as a non-ideal doctrine requires that we start from the distribution of the possession of income and wealth as it is, rather than asking what a just distribution would be in a world with strong idealized properties, such as for example the absence of inherited wealth and privileges, a world in which everyone's basic needs are met or where we are in a state of initial property acquisition.³

Social scientists and scholars in the humanities have a long tradition of theorizing and conducting research on the position of the worst-off in society. In theories of justice, this is especially visible in the wide support for sufficientarianism.⁴ In its dominant understanding, sufficientarianism is the view that distributive justice should be concerned with ensuring that no one falls below a certain minimal threshold, which can be either a poverty threshold or a threshold for living a minimally decent life.⁵ It shouldn't be surprising that the study of poverty and disadvantage is so vast, since most people hold the view that these conditions are intrinsically bad.

Given the sizeable philosophical literature on poverty and the position of the worst-off, it *is* surprising that so little (if any) contemporary theorizing on justice has focused on the upper tail of income and wealth distribution. Obviously, there is a great deal of literature about theories of justice in relation to inequality in general; it may well be that political philosophers assume that it is not necessary to single out the upper tail of the distribution in particular. Still, I think it would

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- 3 In contrast, starting gate theories, such as Robert Nozick's (1974) entitlement theory, outline just procedures against a background of just initial acquisition, and are therefore harder to apply to non-ideal circumstances, since fair initial acquisition is hardly ever possible.
 - 4 For example, Frankfurt (1987); Anderson (1999); Wolff & De-Shalit (2007).
 - 5 Arneson (2013). Liam Shields (2012) has offered an alternative understanding of sufficientarianism, which, in a nutshell, entails that there are important reasons to secure enough, and once that threshold is reached, the reasons for securing further benefits change. Shields's proposal is not a standard view of sufficientarianism, and due to space constraints will therefore not be further discussed in this chapter.

be helpful for political philosophers to conduct a normative analysis of the upper tail of the distribution. For one thing, this would make it possible for philosophers to have greater impact on existing debates in society. For a long time normative claims related to the rights, privileges, and duties of rich people have been advanced in public debate. Most countries have some political party that claims that the rich should pay for economic crises, rather than the poor or the middle classes. In recent years several European political parties have proposed introducing an increase in the highest marginal tax rate of the highest income group; similarly, the Occupy movement in the United States has claimed that the “one percent” should be taxed much more heavily. Some citizens have also complained that austerity measures affect the poor and the middle classes disproportionately, rather than affecting the rich in equal measure. What all these normative claims have in common is a focus on the upper tail of the distribution—thereby making a distinction between the middle class and the rich.⁶

Interestingly, in recent years several economists have developed analyses of the top of the income and wealth distributions. Most famous was Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the 21st Century*, along with his earlier collaborative research with other economists, which generated part of the data forming the empirical basis of the later book.⁷ These studies show that in the decades following the Second World War inequality decreased, yet wealth inequality has again been expanding since the 1980s. Piketty offers a theory for why the postwar period should be regarded as an historical exception, rather than the beginning of a period in which inequality would decrease or stagnate. Piketty argues that this increase in inequality is undesirable, but certainly not all economists share this view. The Harvard economist Greg Mankiw has defended the moral desirability of letting the rich be rich, on the grounds that they deserve their wealth.⁸ However, as Mankiw himself admits, he is merely engaging in “amateur political philosophy.”⁹ In fact, few

6 In this chapter, the term “affluent” refers to anyone who is not poor. An affluent person can be either rich or non-rich. “Middle class” refers to those who are affluent but not rich.

7 Piketty (2014); See also Piketty & Saez (2003); Atkinson & Piketty (2007); Alvaredo, Atkinson, Piketty & Saez (2013).

8 Mankiw (2013).

9 Mankiw (2013, 22).

normative claims made by economists about inequality and the rise of top earners are well defended. But this should not necessarily be seen as a criticism, since in the intellectual division of labor, this task falls on other shoulders.

In this chapter I want to articulate one particular version of limitarianism and offer a justification. But before doing so, I first want to highlight that there are a variety of limitarian views, and a variety of grounds on which they can be defended. In this sense it is no different from the other distributive doctrines, such as sufficientarianism, prioritarianism, or egalitarianism. In the next Section, I spell out a variety of potential strategies for defending the limitarian view. Some offer reasons why being rich is *intrinsically* bad. In contrast, the reasons that I offer regard limitarianism as derivatively justified. Limitarianism as a distributive view is justified in the world as it is (the non-ideal world), because it is instrumentally necessary for the protection of two intrinsic values: political equality (Section III), and the meeting of unmet urgent needs (Section IV). After offering these two arguments for limitarianism, I address the question of which notion of wealth or riches the two arguments require (Section V), and discuss whether limitarianism should be considered a moral or a political doctrine (Section VI). I will also respond to two objections: the objection from unequal opportunities and the incentive objection (Section VII). The final section sketches an agenda for future research on limitarianism.

2. Intrinsic versus Non-Intrinsic Limitarianism

In its most general formulation, limitarianism is a claim relating to distributive morality, which entails that it is not morally permissible to be situated above a certain threshold in the distribution of a desirable good. Limitarianism could be defended in various dimensions or domains, and with different theoretical modifications. For example, the case of a personal emissions quota that has been studied in the climate ethics literature is an example of a limitarian institution, whereby the good that is limited is the right to emit greenhouse gases. Breena Holland has argued for the introduction of “capability ceilings” in environmental regulation, which are “limitations on the choice to pursue certain individual actions that are justifiable when those actions

can have or significantly contribute to the effect of undermining another person's minimum threshold of capability provision and protection."¹⁰ For example, if having access to high-quality water and not living in an environment with severely polluted water are capability thresholds, then extracting gas by means of hydro-fracking may not be permitted in case fracking could contaminate the local hydro-ecosystems. Normative arguments for limits could also be provided in other areas of life. For example, one could discuss limitarianism in the context of global population size, and argue that due to environmental concerns, there should be a moral limit of one child per adult.¹¹

In this chapter, the focus is on limitarianism of financial resources. Limitarianism is then the view that it is not morally permissible to be rich. Given that our "metric" is a monetary metric, we can reformulate the limitarian claim. Call *surplus money* the difference between a rich individual's financial means and the threshold that distinguishes rich from non-rich people. By definition, only rich people have surplus money. Limitarianism can then be restated as claiming that it is morally bad to have surplus money.

How can limitarianism be justified? That would depend on whether we aim to defend limitarianism as having intrinsic value or instrumental value—a distinction that also applies to egalitarianism.¹² *Intrinsic limitarianism* is the view that being rich is intrinsically bad, whereas according to *non-intrinsic limitarianism*, riches are morally non-permissible for a reason that refers to some other value.

In this chapter I am concerned only with non-intrinsic limitarianism, and remain agnostic on the question of whether intrinsic limitarianism is a plausible view. To examine the plausibility of intrinsic limitarianism, one could develop an argument based on paternalism, whereby wealth is objectively a burden on rich people and their children, leading them to suffer in the nonmaterial dimensions of a flourishing life. There may be some evidence for this, but in this chapter I will not investigate this argumentative strategy any further.¹³ Other argumentative strategies for

10 Holland (2014, 142).

11 Overall (2012).

12 See, e.g., O'Neill (2008); Hausman & Waldren (2011).

13 For empirical research suggesting that high material wealth is associated with low psychological well-being, see, e.g., Pittman (1985); Csikszentmihalyi (1999).

intrinsic limitarianism can be sought in virtue ethics. Several arguments against wealth accumulation, based on virtue ethics and perfectionist theories, can be found in the history of ethics, and have been very important in, for example, the teachings of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

In this chapter, I merely want to note the possibility of defending intrinsic limitarianism, and will remain agnostic on the plausibility of that view and on the soundness of any of its justifications. Instead, I limit myself to developing two reasons for non-intrinsic limitarianism. The first, which I will discuss in the next section, is the democratic argument for limitarianism, which focuses on the claim that wealth undermines the ideal of political equality. Section IV will then present and analyze another argument for limitarianism: the argument from unmet urgent needs.

The distinction between intrinsic and non-intrinsic limitarianism is important, since the two views offer different answers to the question: “What—if anything—is wrong with some people being rich in an ideal world?” Non-intrinsic limitarianism will most likely respond that in such an ideal situation, where all important intrinsic values are secured, riches are not morally objectionable. Non-intrinsic limitarianism will limit its claim that riches are morally objectionable to a world where certain intrinsically important values are not secured, and where limitarianism is instrumentally valuable to securing those ultimate ends. In contrast, intrinsic limitarianism will answer the question affirmatively. Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, in this chapter I am agnostic on whether intrinsic limitarianism is a plausible view. My aims here are instead limited to an analysis and defense of non-intrinsic limitarianism.

3. The Democratic Argument for Limitarianism

The first justification for the limitarian doctrine can be found in political philosophy and political science, where there exists a long history of arguments that great inequalities in income and wealth undermine the value of democracy and the ideal of political equality in particular.¹⁴

14 On the value of democracy and the notion of “political equality,” see, e.g., Beitz (1989); Knight & Johnson (1997); Christiano (2008).

Rich people are able to translate their financial power into political power through a variety of mechanisms. In his article “Money in Politics,” Thomas Christiano discusses four types of mechanisms by which the expenditure of money can influence various aspects of political systems.¹⁵ Christiano shows how the wealthy are not only more able but also more likely to spend money on these various mechanisms that translate money into political power. This is due to the decreasing marginal utility of money. Poor people need every single dime or penny to spend on food or basic utilities, and hence, for them, spending 100 dollars or 100 pounds on acquiring political influence would come at a serious loss of utility. In contrast, when the upper-middle class and the rich spend the same amount, they see a much lower drop in utility, that is, the utility cost they pay for the same expenditure is much smaller.

The democratic argument for limitarianism can easily be derived from the mechanisms that Christiano outlines: Because rich people have surplus money, they are both very able and seemingly very likely to use that money to acquire political influence and power. On the account of “the rich” that I will develop in Section 5, the rich have virtually nothing to lose if they spend their excess money, which is the money that goes beyond what one needs to fully flourish in life. The welfare effect—understood in terms of a certain set of valuable functionings—is more or less zero. There may be some psychological welfare loss, such as a loss in status if one spends a fortune on politics rather than on the latest Lamborghini, or there may be a purely subjective loss if one does not like to witness a decline in one’s financial fortune, but there will be no loss on the account of well-being presented below. In other words, the arguments Christiano develops for those who have some money to spend will apply *a fortiori* to the rich, as defined in Section 5.

The four mechanisms that turn money into political power are buying votes, gatekeeping, influencing opinion, and the workings of money as an independent political power.

First, rich people can fund political parties and individuals. In many systems of private campaign financing, those who donate a lot will get special treatment or greater support for their causes. Donations generally come with the expectation that if the funder one day needs some help

15 Christiano (2012, 241–245).

from the politician he or she will get it. This commonsense wisdom is reflected in the saying “He who pays the piper calls the tune.” Receiving money makes people, including politicians, indebted to the donor and likely to try to please them, do them a favor, spread their views, or at the very least, self-censor their own views to avoid upsetting the donor. In the political arena, this undermines political equality. But, as Christiano points out, there are also other democratic values at stake. When money can be used to buy votes, those who funded the elected politician will see their interests protected in the policies that are implemented—but a large part of the costs of those policies will be borne by society as a whole. Vote-buyers are, in a certain sense, free-riding on the spending of society as a whole, which bears a (large) chunk of the costs, for legislation that favors the interests of said private donors.

The second mechanism for turning money into political influence or power is in using money to set the agenda for collective decision making. If, as with the US presidential elections, the ability to raise funds is a crucial determinant in who will be the next candidate, and if upper-middle-class and wealthy people are more likely to be donors, then political candidates who represent those upper-middle and upper-class interests are much more likely to be on the ballot in the first place. Since the affluent are much more likely to contribute to campaign financing, and since donors choose to give money to people who have the same values and beliefs, those who cannot donate will not have their interests and views represented in the election debates or on the ballot. Christiano argues that if part of the value of democracy is that it publicly treats citizens as equals by giving them an equal say in the process of collective decision making, then financial expenditures on politics cause a great inequality of opportunity when it comes to influencing the political agenda.¹⁶

A third mechanism is that money can be used to influence opinions. Rich people can buy media outlets, which they can use to control both the spread of information and the arguments that are exchanged in public debate. Media outlets have become a very important power factor in contemporary democracies, yet if access to the media is a commodity that can be bought and sold to the highest bidder, this provides another

16 Christiano (2012, 245).

mechanism for rich people to translate financial power into political power. Lobbyists are another increasingly important instrument for influencing opinions. Again, their services are costly, so the interests of those who can afford to hire lobbyists will be much better represented in the decision making of policy makers and politicians.

While the corporate media and lobbyists are most often discussed when analyzing how money can influence opinions, there are also more subtle ways for rich people to influence views—not necessarily on direct questions of legislation and policy making, but also more diffusely on the construction of what is perceived as sound evidence and knowledge. Rich people can also put financial power into changing the ideological climate and what is perceived as “sound evidence,” e.g., via research and think tanks, which provide arguments supporting the views of their funders on various social, economic, and political issues. For example, historical research by Daniel Stedman Jones has shown how private financial support played a crucial role in the spread of neoliberal thinking within universities and subsequently within politics.¹⁷

Finally, to the extent that rich people have their wealth concentrated in firms, they can undermine democratically chosen aims by using their economic power. This turns the power of capitalists into a feasibility constraint for democratic policy making. For example, if citizens have democratically decided that they want fewer greenhouse-gas emissions in their country, then major firms can threaten to shift polluting production to other countries if the democratically elected government were to impose stricter ecological emission regulation.¹⁸

These are all mechanisms through which wealth undermines the political equality of citizens. Yet the political equality of citizens is the cornerstone of free societies—and it is the most basic principle of our democratic constitutions. The constitution should guarantee political equality, but it does not protect our right to be rich. Thus, we have an initial argument for why we shouldn’t be rich—namely, that it undermines political equality.

One could object to the democratic argument for limitarianism as follows. The moral concern is not so much that there are inequalities within one sphere of life (e.g., economic welfare) but rather that one’s

¹⁷ Stedman Jones (2012).

¹⁸ Christiano (2012, 250); see also Christiano (2010).

position in one sphere of life can be used to acquire a better position in another sphere of life (e.g., politics, education). The real moral concern is therefore not inequality per se, but rather the spillover of inequality from one sphere of life into another sphere of life.¹⁹ Surely there should be solutions to preventing financial power from turning into political power other than simply forcing rich people to get rid of their surplus money. For example, one could try to reform the legislation on campaign funding, or the state could guarantee public radio and television in order to restore the balance of views and arguments in public debate. Dean Machin has argued that we should present the superrich with the choice between incurring a 100% tax on their wealth above the level that makes them superrich, or forfeiting some political rights.²⁰ The idea is that this would prevent the rich from buying political influence and power. Similarly, one could argue that if we implement proper campaign legislation and anti-corruption legislation, the money invested by the rich could no longer significantly affect politics, and there would be no democratic reason to make surplus money an undesirable thing.

While some of these institutional measures are surely necessary for a healthy democracy, none of the solutions will restore political equality between rich and non-rich citizens. The reason for this is that much of the political influence of rich people escapes the workings of formal institutions, such as legislation and regulation. Rich people could give up their right to vote, but if they are still able to set up and fund think tanks that produce ideologically driven research, or if they still have direct private access to government officials, then they will still have disproportionate levels of political power. Given the overall class stratification in society, rich people tend to know other rich people from the schools and colleges where they received their education, or from socializing in clubs where membership is only affordable to rich people. Money not only translates into economic capital and political power; it also translates into social capital. Class-stratified social capital accumulation can to some extent be limited, for example, by outlawing expensive and selective private education, or by using spatial politics to create mixed neighborhoods. But this can at best limit the accumulation of social capital according to lines of affluence and class. Most of the

¹⁹ Walzer (1983).

²⁰ Machin (2013).

reasons why rich and influential people socialize with other rich and influential people cannot be influenced by policy makers.

Imposing formal institutional mechanisms in order to decrease the impact of money on politics is thus feasible only to a limited extent. Large inequalities in income, and the possession of surplus money in particular, will thus always undermine political equality, even in societies where those four mechanisms have been weakened as much as possible through institutional measures. Therefore, if we hold that the value of democracy, and political equality in particular, are cornerstones of just societies, then we have an initial reason to endorse limitarianism.

4. The Argument from Unmet Urgent Needs

The second justification for the limitarian doctrine can be called *the argument from unmet urgent needs*. This argument is essentially consequentialist in nature, and makes the justification of limitarianism dependent upon three empirical conditions. These conditions, which we can call the circumstances of limitarianism, are the following:

(a) the condition of extreme global poverty: a world in which there are many people living in extreme poverty, and whose lives could be significantly improved by government-led actions that require financial resources;

(b) the condition of local or global disadvantages: a world in which many people are not flourishing and are significantly deprived in some dimensions and whose lives could be significantly improved by government-led actions that require financial resources;

(c) the condition of urgent collective-action problems: a world that is faced with urgent (global) collective-action problems that could (in part) be addressed by government-led actions that require financial resources.

The *argument from unmet urgent needs* is dependent upon these conditions: if none of these conditions are met, the argument no longer holds. At least one of these three conditions has to hold for this argument to be valid. Yet, in the world as we know it, all three are met.²¹ First, the

21 One exception may apply, and that is whether governments (at different levels, from local to global government-like organizations such the UN) would be capable of addressing the three types of unmet needs effectively, if only they had the funds.

condition of extreme global poverty is clearly met. Billions of people worldwide are living in (extreme) poverty, and while not all solutions that entail financial costs or financial redistribution are effective in eradicating poverty, many if not all of the effective poverty-reducing interventions do require financial resources.²² Even institutional changes, such as creating a publicly accountable bureaucracy or establishing the rule of law, require financial resources.

The second condition is also met. Even people who are not extremely poor in material terms can be deprived or disadvantaged in many other ways. All post-industrialized countries have citizens who are homeless or who are socially excluded to the extent that they cannot fully take part in society; children with special educational needs do not always get the education that allows them to be adequately challenged and developed; a surprisingly large number of people are functionally illiterate; and a worryingly large number of both adults and children have mental health problems for which they are not receiving adequate help.²³

The third condition is also met, since there are numerous collective-action problems that require the attention of governments or other actors of change. As twenty years of *Human Development Reports* have documented, several major collective problems facing the world could be effectively addressed if only the government were to devote sufficient attention and resources to these issues. Addressing climate change and the deterioration of the Earth's ecosystems is arguably the most urgent problem, which could partly be mitigated by a massive investment in green technological innovation. Other issues could be addressed by, e.g., providing expanded educational opportunities for girls, reproductive health services in areas where there is a large unmet

In so-called failed states or in countries that have very corrupt governments, the conditions may not be met. In these cases, it may be the case that private initiatives by rich individuals may be more effective in meeting the three categories of unmet urgent needs.

22 Examples of resource-dependent development interventions that contribute to poverty reduction are micro-credit schemes or India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. The clearest case of a development intervention that is heavily resource-dependent is an unconditional basic income, or unconditional child benefit grants or elderly pensions as they exist, e.g., in South Africa.

23 See, e.g., Wolff & de-Shalit (2007).

need for contraceptives, large-scale programs of reforestation, and so forth. All of these require financial resources.²⁴

If any of these three circumstances is in place, certain needs will have a higher moral urgency than the desires that could be met by the income and wealth that rich people hold. Recall that the money that rich people hold that exceeds the wealth line is their *surplus money*. The argument from unmet urgent needs claims that since surplus money does not contribute to people's flourishing, it has zero moral weight, and it would be unreasonable to reject the principle that we ought to use that money to meet these urgent unmet needs. The limitarian principle is thus supported by a modified version of Thomas Scanlon's Rescue Principle, which states that "if you are presented with a situation in which you can prevent something very bad from happening, or alleviate someone's dire plight, by making only a slight (or even moderate) sacrifice, then it would be wrong not to do so."²⁵ Scanlon also points to Peter Singer's famous defense of a version of the Rescue Principle in his influential paper "Famine, Morality and Affluence."²⁶

The limitarian principle I defend here bears resemblance to Singer's and Scanlon's principles. Yet there are at least two significant differences. First, limitarianism is less demanding than Singer's and Scanlon's principles since it only makes a claim about moral duties related to surplus money. It does not spell out any duties we have with regard to the money that we would use in order to flourish yet do not need to stay out of poverty—say, money we spend on learning the piano, or on taking a holiday abroad. Under one widespread interpretation of Singer's view, we ought not to spend that money on playing the piano or taking a holiday, but should send it to Oxfam. As many have pointed out, such a radical principle suffers from overdemandingness.²⁷ Limitarianism, in contrast, need not take a stance on our duties related to the money we possess that is not surplus money, and hence can be part of a comprehensive theory of justice or morality that is able to avoid overdemandingness. For example, while limitarianism claims that 100% of surplus money should be redistributed and re-allocated to satisfy the

24 See, e.g., Gardiner, Caney, Jamieson & Shue (2010); UNDP, (2011); Broome (2012).

25 Scanlon (1998, 224).

26 Singer (1972).

27 For recent discussion, see Sønderholm (2013). See also Cullet (2004).

three sets of urgent unmet needs, this claim could be part of a more comprehensive view on justice whereby incomes between the poverty line and the wealth line would be taxed at percentages well below 100%, and those tax revenues should be redistributed to the urgent unmet needs mentioned above.

The second difference to Singer and Scanlon's principles is that the argument for unmet urgent needs broadens the category of needs that are to be addressed. Scanlon refers to "lives that are immediately threatened" or people "in great pain, or living in conditions of bare subsistence." Singer, too, focuses on the globally worst-off, those whose deaths from famines and destitution could be prevented. While I do not deny that the basic needs of these people should be met, I cannot claim that the life of a homeless person living on the streets of Moscow or Chicago, at great risk of freezing to death, or the lives of psychiatric patients, suffering from anxiety attacks and self-harming behaviors, any less urgently need addressing.

Note that the argument from unmet urgent needs does not deny that it is possible for people to still *want* their surplus money, for example to spend it on luxurious lifestyles, or to simply accumulate it. Yet the account of flourishing is an objective account of well-being: Flourishing should not be confused with a desire-satisfaction account of well-being. Such subjective accounts of well-being may be plausible and defensible for some purposes, but not if we need a *policy-relevant notion* of well-being, as is the case for discussions about distributive justice.

Note also that the argument from urgent unmet needs does not regard wealth as an intrinsically morally bad social state, or rich people as non-virtuous people. Rather, the argument for urgent unmet needs is based on the premise that the value of surplus income is morally insignificant *for the holder* of that income, but not for society at large, at least under certain alternative usages.

A strength of this consequentialist argument for limitarianism is that it is highly suitable for the non-ideal world, in which we often do not have information about the origins of people's surplus income and about their initial opportunity sets. More precisely, we do not need to know whether someone's surplus income comes from clever innovation in a market where there was a huge demand for a particular innovative good, whether it is whitewashed money from semi-criminal activities, if

it came from being part of a cartel of high-level managers who give each other excessively high incomes, or if it is the accumulated inheritance from four frugal grandparents. If one has so much money that one has more than is needed to fully flourish in life, one has too much, and that money should be redistributed in order to ameliorate one of the three conditions that make up the circumstances of limitarianism.

5. An Account of Riches

In the two preceding Sections, I have offered two arguments in defense of limitarianism. Yet these arguments remain vague and elusive as long as we don't know what the relevant thresholds are. In other words, we need to know who counts as rich, and who doesn't. Such an account of riches is required, since otherwise limitarianism will suffer from the same ambiguity that surrounds sufficientarianism—the view that everyone should have resources or well-being above a certain threshold. As Paula Casal puts it, “sufficientarianism maintains its plausibility by remaining vague about the critical threshold.”²⁸ It is difficult to know whether limitarianism is a plausible view if we don't know what the critical threshold is above which a person will be judged as having too much.

In this Section, I will therefore offer a conceptualization of the notion of “riches.” This account will allow us to identify rich people. The conceptualization will need to meet three criteria. First, the purpose of the conceptualization is that it will serve a function in normative claims of justice. Second, given the non-ideal character of this project, the conceptualization has to be operable: With access to the relevant data, economists and social scientists should be able to estimate the amount of riches within a certain population and be able to identify rich persons. Third, the conceptualization should not be an all-things-considered account of all that matters when we consider people's quality of life. A person can be rich but unhappy: A proper conceptualization of riches should not lump all these factors together. Being rich is not all that matters in life—in fact, it may be something that doesn't matter much at all. Yet, for questions of distributive justice, we may have good reason to want to capture riches and only riches, while acknowledging that for

28 Casal (2007, 316).

some other questions this is not what we should be focusing on. After developing a conceptualization of riches, I analyze and respond to two objections to the account of riches.

5.1. Is “Riches” an Absolute or a Relative Notion?

Since poverty and riches are opposite tails of the same distribution, the literature on the conceptualization of poverty provides a good starting point for thinking about how to conceptualize riches.²⁹ If we want to identify the poor, we need to define a line, which is a certain cutoff point on the metric that we hold relevant (e.g., money): Anyone situated below that cutoff point qualifies as poor. To identify rich people, we need to define a riches line, a cutoff point on the metric that everyone situated *above* qualifies as rich. At first sight, then, the conceptualization of riches is symmetrical to the conceptualization of poverty. Three issues emerge from the poverty literature that are relevant for the conceptualization of riches: first, the issue of relative versus absolute poverty measures; second, the question of the relevant metric of comparison; and third, the question of the scope of comparison. We will address the question of the metric of comparisons below, and turn first to the issue of relative versus absolute measures and the scope of these comparisons.

A *relative* poverty measure defines poverty wholly in terms of the distance to the average of the distribution. For example, in the European Union, poverty is defined as living at or below 60% of the median income of the country in which one lives. An *absolute* poverty line defines poverty in terms of the resources needed for meeting some basic needs, such as adequate food, housing, and so forth.

In the empirical literature, it is generally acknowledged that no single poverty line is clearly superior to all other poverty lines, and that each conceptualization of poverty faces some challenges.³⁰ Statisticians and policy makers in Europe, North America, and Australia favor relative measures in the space of income. Nevertheless, there are at least two problems with relative measures from a conceptual point of view.³¹ The first is that relative measures conflate “poverty” with “the worst-off,”

29 Sen (1983).

30 Goodman, Johnson & Webb (1997, 231).

31 Sen (1983).

independently of how well-off or badly off those worst-off are. A relative measure is thus better understood as a hybrid of a poverty measure and an inequality measure. Second, in the case of relative measures, there will always be poor people and hence a fight against poverty can never be won, even if everyone were living in an affluent utopia. The only exception would be either if inequality was completely eliminated or if income distribution below the poverty line was completely eliminated, e.g., by introducing an unconditional basic income pitched at the level of the poverty line.

The second lesson from the poverty literature relates to the scope of poverty comparisons. Poverty measures are generally applied to geographic areas that are relatively homogenous in terms of economic development, or that form a fiscal unit. This is especially true for relative poverty measures. Some absolute poverty measures, particularly related to poverty in developing countries, are absolute and can be applied internationally, such as the well-known \$2/day poverty line. Yet, apart from extreme poverty understood as having the mere prerequisites for physical survival, the consensus on poverty measurement is that poverty needs to be understood in its local context, since being poor in India equates to something different from being poor in England. One could argue that independent of context, there is an abstract idea of poverty shared across contexts, such as not having enough material resources to live a dignified life. But the concrete translation of that abstract idea will then have to be specified in a context-dependent manner.

How have these insights into the relative/absolute nature of poverty measures, and the scope of the comparisons, been used in measures of affluence and riches? The few existing empirical analyses of riches tend to define the rich in relative terms. In one of few empirical studies on the rich, the British social policy scholars Karen Rowlingson and Stephen McKay define three categories of wealthy people: the “rich” are the most affluent 10% on a combined measure of income and assets; the “richer” are the top 1%; while the top 1,000 households are the “richest” group.³²

From a theoretical point of view, relative riches measures seem arbitrary and suffer from the same problems as relative poverty

32 Rowlingson & McKay (2011).

measures.³³ First, if the income distribution shifts, and everyone becomes materially better or worse off, the number of wealthy people stays the same. Suppose we endorse a relative riches measure that defines the rich as the top 10% of the income and assets distribution. Suppose now that the Swedish government discovers a huge oil field below its territories, and decides to distribute the revenues by giving all Swedish citizens equal entitlement to the profits of oil exploitation. If everyone's annual disposable income goes up by 20,000€, then the number of rich, richer, and richest on a relative riches measure will stay exactly the same, and those belonging to the middle classes, who were just below the cutoff point for being counted as rich (say, those who were in the 89th percentile before the real income increase) will still be considered middle class. They were, by this account, almost rich, and apparently the additional 20,000€ of disposable income doesn't make a difference to whether they should count as rich or not. The idea that a riches measure would be insensitive to changes in one's absolute income level is strikingly implausible. Relative riches measures may be appropriate for tracking the income position of the top tail of the income distribution over time, or for comparing the position of the top $x\%$ richest people in different countries, but relative riches measures are unsuited to giving a proper answer to the questions: "What entails riches?" or "Who should count as rich?"

Second, we need to distinguish between being the person who has the best position in material terms (a comparative notion) and being rich (an absolute notion). A person can have an excellent or even the very best position in comparative terms, but in absolute terms could be in a dire situation. This is most obvious in the case of a life-and-death situation. Take a dangerous and overcrowded refugee camp in Darfur. In such a context, having access to a useful basic object like a knife or a torch is surely incredibly important and may be an unusual object to have: Such a person holds a valuable asset that most other people in the refugee camp don't have, and hence in comparative terms this person is well-off. But possessing some valuable object that most other people around her don't possess is not enough to make a person rich. It would be deeply counterintuitive to say that an undernourished refugee

33 Of course, it should be acknowledged that empirical research is often confronted with data limitations and has to make simplifications.

whose only possession is a knife should be considered rich. Instead, such a person may be said to be slightly less deprived or slightly better equipped in the struggle for survival.

The conceptual problems of relative poverty measures are thus reflected in relative riches measures. Yet from this it doesn't follow that the only options left are absolute measures of poverty and wealth, such as the \$2/day poverty measure, or a riches metric that would state, for example, that if your disposable household income is 100,000€ or more, you count as rich. There are more options for riches measures, but in order to see them we need to make a distinction between two types of relative measures, namely measures that are distribution-relative versus measures that are context-relative.

Distribution-relative measures define riches or poverty as being at a certain distance from the average of the distribution. *Context-relative or contextual measures*, on the other hand, make *some* (generally weaker) reference to the context of the measurement in the definition of the riches or poverty line, without making that reference a function of the distribution itself. Context-relativity is plausible for an account of riches, since it allows us to account for the socially constructive nature of riches, and to allow for differences in our understanding of riches over time and space. For example, in Western Europe owning a new yet not luxurious car doesn't in itself make one rich, but there are areas in the world where car ownership is a prime indicator of affluence.

A plausible conceptualization of riches should avoid distribution-relativity, that is, riches should not be defined as a particular share or percentage of the distribution of welfare, well-being, or material resources, or be defined as those living at a certain distance above the average of that distribution. Rather, we should be able to describe in absolute terms what having riches entails—even if that absolute description is context-specific—and those people who meet the criteria that are entailed by this conceptualization will then count as rich.

The choice of a context-specific absolute conceptualization of riches provides a first step toward a conceptualization of riches. However, it leaves two difficult questions to be answered: First, what is the metric in which we conceptualize riches, and second, where do we draw the riches line—the cutoff point on the metric above which a person will

qualify as rich, and thus, according to the limitarian doctrine, as having too much?

5.2. The Power of Material Resources

The intuitive and commonsense understanding of riches is the state in which one has more resources than are needed to fully flourish in life. Yet to develop a distributive rule, this needs to be expanded and specified. More specifically, we need an articulation of the relationship between resources and human flourishing. It seems quite obvious that we do not want to develop a metric of subjective well-being for the conceptualization of riches (like happiness or preference satisfaction, or self-perceived judgments of affluence). A subjective measure, such as how satisfied a person is, or how affluent a person considers herself to be, may be interesting for other purposes, but it will not reflect what affluence and riches actually are. A subjective measure would clash with our commonsense notion that affluence does not refer to a mental state of mind, or to happiness or satisfaction, but rather to the material possessions that people hold or the material side of their quality of life. In addition, subjective well-being measures are problematic because of the pervasive issue of adaptation. Problems of adaptation occur not only in the case of disadvantaged or oppressed people adapting to adverse circumstances; rich people also adapt to their current level of welfare, and hence adapt their levels of satisfaction and their aspirations accordingly *in an upward way*. A rich person living among other rich people may not feel rich at all, and a rich person living among the hyper-rich may even strongly believe that she is not rich, since others around her have even more than she does. Particularly in countries with high levels of class segregation, this may lead to significant distortions in people's own assessment of their level of affluence. We should thus stay away from subjective judgments about affluence status, and instead develop an account of affluence and riches that is objective and conceptualizes the relationship between material possessions and flourishing or well-being.³⁴

34 For arguments about why metrics of justice should be objective, see Anderson (2010, 85–87).

In daily language, the common metric of affluence is the material resources that people have at their disposal—both flows of material resources as well as stocks of material resources. In their empirical estimates, Rowlingson and McKay use a combination of income flows and an estimate of assets as their metric for determining who counts as rich, richer, and richest. Many other popular indicators of riches also focus on the amount of money people have in their possession (e.g., we speak of “billionaires”) or of the luxurious material goods people have bought with this money, such as expensive cars, large houses, designer clothes, and so forth. There does seem to be a *prima facie* case for conceptualizing affluence and riches in terms of a metric that focuses on the material side of quality of life—either on the means that one has at one’s disposal (income, durable consumption goods, assets), or on the material lifestyle that one can afford to enjoy.

Yet some of the arguments that have been voiced from a capability perspective on the conceptualization of poverty may also have some force in the conceptualization of affluence. For example, if I have extensive needs due to a physical impairment or pervasive mental health problems, then the amount of money that would make a non-impaired person rich may not make me rich, since I may well have to spend a lot of money on my medical needs before I can contemplate spending it on luxury items. The well-known argument from the capability approach, which favors focusing on what people can do with their resources rather than on the resources itself, applies.³⁵

However, accounting for such factors may lead us into a tricky situation when conceptualizing affluence, since we may not want to account for all individual differences between people. Some of these differences may be needs, such as in the case of an impaired person, but some of these differences may simply be “expensive taste,” for which we may not want to account when deciding who is affluent and who isn’t.³⁶ For example, a semi-paraplegic person who buys an electric wheelchair buys an expensive good that she needs in order to secure some basic functioning, namely to acquire the same mobility that non-impaired people have in walking, cycling, or using public transport. Yet

35 See Sen (1983); Sen, (1987); Sen, (1985). For empirical estimates showing that disabled people need far more resources to reach the same level of affluence, see Kuklys (2006).

36 On expensive taste, see Dworkin (1981a).

an able-bodied person who lives in a city with excellent public transport and cycling facilities, who buys a fancy scooter just for fun or because he is a bit lazy, is buying a luxury item. They are similar commodities and may be similarly priced, but from a normative point of view the second purchase should count as a luxury item, whereas for the impaired person it would be deeply counterintuitive to say that such a purchase counts as a luxury item, since it is simply needed to secure some basic functioning. The challenge of distinguishing “needs” from “expensive tastes” is a general problem for the capability approach, and indicates the theoretical price we have to pay for endorsing the core capabilitarian insight that what matters is not what resources people have, but what those resources can do for people.

Adopting these insights from the debate on the metric of justice, I want to propose a metric of affluence that accounts for these three insights: First, it should account for our commonsense understanding of the terms “rich” and “affluence” as referring to people’s material possessions; second, it should incorporate the core insight from the capability approach, namely that when we consider people’s standard of living we are not interested in resources themselves but in what those resources enable people to do and be; and third, it should account for the concerns related to the need/want distinction that have been discussed at length in the literature on theories of distributive justice.

Let me call the proposed metric of affluence *the power of material resources* (PMR). PMR is an income metric that makes a number of modifications to our income level in order for the modified income metric to properly reflect the power we have to turn that income into material quality of life. The PMR will be constructed in such a way that it best captures the conceptualization of the material side of quality of life, and can therefore be used as a metric of affluence.

$$\text{PMR} = (Y_G + Y_k + A - \text{EXP} - T - G) * \text{ES} * \text{CF}$$

1. PMR starts from the gross total income of a household (Y_G). That is, we aggregate income from all sources—whether from labor, profits, entitlements (such as child benefits), transfers, or returns on financial capital or investment. In line with all empirical measurements of poverty and inequality, we assume sharing of income and assets within the household.

2. We add to Y_G a monetary estimate of any income or transfer in kind (Y_K). For example, if an elderly person is living in a nursing home that is paid for by her adult child, then the cost of living in a nursing home will be added to the estimated income of that elderly person (and subtracted as a gift (G) from the PMR of the adult child). Similarly, if a diamond company decides to give its employees diamonds as a bonus or Christmas present, then the market value of those diamonds will be added to those people's income.
3. We add an estimate of the life annuity (A) of a household's assets. That is, we estimate what the assets of a household would be worth if they were to be sold as a life annuity, that is, if the asset were turned into an annual payment for the rest of the owner's life. These assets include not only real estate and financial savings, but also shares, stocks, and company ownership.
4. If a person endures reasonable expenses in order to undertake income-generating activities, these are also deducted from gross income. For example, the net expenditures (EXP) on child care and other forms of family care, but also expenditures for commuting or the improvement of one's human capital, should be included.³⁷ Obviously, this notion of "reasonable expenses" is vague, and there will inevitably be a grey area where we are unsure of and/or disagree about where to draw the line between reasonable and non-reasonable expenses. But the presence of a grey area should not prevent us from deducing at least those expenses where a large consensus exists that they are unavoidable or otherwise reasonable and needed for income generation.
5. Next, we deduct the taxes that a person has paid on income and the annuity (T) and also deduct any transfers of money or gifts (G) the household has made. Not all gifts can be deducted from an income to decide on a person's PMR; this applies only to those gifts that represent a net increase in someone else's

³⁷ The share of these expenditures that is already covered by one's employer or the government shouldn't of course be deducted, except if they have first been added to Y_G .

PMR. Gifts to causes that do not affect someone's PMR, such as political campaign contributions, or financial support of the arts and sciences, should not be taken into consideration, since these gifts give the gift-giver power to decide on which causes more or less money is spent.

6. At this point we need to consider the capability argument that what intrinsically matters is not income, but rather what resources enable people to do and to be. Income is at best a proxy for what matters; in other words, it may matter for instrumental or diagnostic reasons. In addition, people are diverse and income metrics cannot sufficiently account for this diversity: People need different amounts of income to meet the same set of basic capabilities. These insights have been developed in detail in the poverty literature—both in theory and in empirical measures.³⁸ How does this insight transpose itself on the upper tail of the distribution? If a person has personal characteristics that mean she has less of an ability to convert income into valuable functionings (or that allow her to avoid negative functionings³⁹), then this conversion factor (CF) needs to be applied to her gross income. If someone is perfectly able to turn income into a valuable functioning, then $CF = 1$ and no correction is needed. If a person is severely impaired or has other characteristics for which they cannot be held responsible and which lead to a need for significantly more resources than other people to reach the same level of valuable functionings, then $CF < 1$.⁴⁰ The lower the value of CF, the lower the ability of a person to turn income into valuable

38 Influenced by the capability approach, economists have developed new poverty measures that have functionings as their metric, such as the Multidimensional Poverty Measure, which was developed by Alkire & Foster (2011).

39 Negative functionings are functionings with a negative value: One is better off without those functionings. Examples are being in pain, being depressed, and having one's bodily integrity violated.

40 Introducing a notion of responsibility is very important. It rules out claims by a person who chooses for and/or identifies with a religion that would severely constrain her capacity to convert money into functionings. It is also needed to provide a solid response to a criminal billionaire in jail who could claim that he is not able to fully flourish in his life and therefore doesn't count as rich.

functionings, or, put differently, the more money that person needs to reach a certain level of valuable functionings.

7. Finally, we apply household equivalence scales (ES) to take into account the number of persons within a household. In poverty and inequality measurement, income is generally modified to account for pooling and sharing of income within households, and for household size and composition.⁴¹ For this purpose economists have developed “household equivalence scales,” which is a factor allowing the rescaling of household income to what that income means for each person living in that household. Rather than dividing a household income by the number of persons living in a household, it is assumed that there is some joint consumption of goods—for example a person living alone needs a fridge, but four people sharing a household together can share one fridge. So the normative relevance of adapting household equivalence scales is that we endorse the view that the material standard of living matters, and in order to reach the same material standard of living, two single persons living on their own need more money than a couple living together.⁴²

Applying equivalence scales to define PMR implies that we are assuming that household income and the revenue from assets are shared within the household.⁴³ The reason we apply household equivalence scales to our income measure is that we want to be able to compare households of different sizes and compositions. Yet using household equivalent

41 This is the “modified OECD equivalence scale,” which is well-known among welfare economists and scholars working with income statistics.

42 For example, the household equivalence scales used by EUROSTAT (the statistical agency of the European Union) are 1.0 for the first adult in a household, 0,4 for any additional household member 14 years or older, and 0,3 for each child younger than 14. If a household of two adults and two children younger than 14 earns in total 80,000€, than a per capita (average) income in the household would be 80,000 divided by 4 = 20,000€, whereas using the EUROSTAT equivalence scales the equalized household income would be 80,000 divided by (1.0+0,4+0,3+0,3), which is 80.000 divided by 2.0= 40.000. Equivalence scales can thus make a big difference.

43 This assumption can be criticized, since we know from empirical studies that household income is not equally shared among all members. See for example Woolley & Marshall (1984). Yet the alternative assumption, to assume no sharing of income within the household, would be even more unrealistic.

scales is a normative decision, since it implies that for the purpose of deciding whether someone counts as rich, we do not conceptualize having children as equivalent to a consumer choice,⁴⁴ or as an action that has an externality on others.⁴⁵ When deciding whether a certain household income makes the members of that household rich or not, each human being should be taken into account. Suppose a single person earns £120,000 on her own, and doesn't need to provide for anyone else. Suppose our riches metric and riches line are such that with this income the single person qualifies as rich. How should we compare her with her colleague who also earns £120,000, but who is a parent providing for her family of six in which she is the only earner? It seems plausible to suggest that the single person is affluent, while the members of the six-person household are decently well-off, but not rich, since they need to divide the £120,000 among themselves in order to secure their standard of living. Nevertheless, the way PMR deals with children is a contentious issue, as one of the objections discussed below will show.

5.3. The Riches Line

We now have a metric of affluence, namely the “power of material resources”. But how high should one's PMR be in order to count as rich? Where should we situate the cutoff line?

We should determine the riches line by reference to a certain set of capabilities to which people should have access as a matter of fully flourishing in life. In capability theory, there is a common distinction between a set of *basic capabilities* and capabilities *tout-court* (that is, all capabilities—which have no ceiling). Basic capabilities are those that one should have in order not to be deprived.⁴⁶ To identify the rich, we need to proceed in a similar fashion. We need to take two steps that are both conceptual and normative: First, we should identify the set of capabilities that are relevant for the standard of living, or the material side of the quality of life, rather than for a more encompassing notion of quality of life that also includes non-material dimensions. Second, we need to decide on the riches line, that is, the cutoff point above which people count as rich.

44 Becker (1981).

45 Casal & Williams (1995).

46 Robeyns (2016).

The first thing that this conceptualization requires is the establishment of a list of functionings that are the relevant dimensions for a standard of living. Luckily, there is by now considerable literature on this question, though it comes in a number of slightly different variants. One can select the relevant capabilities based on a fundamental normative grounding, e.g., those capabilities that protect our human dignity, enable us to be equal citizens, or that protect our autonomy.⁴⁷ Alternatively, one can start from a discourse-theoretical or deliberative democratic point of view and endorse a procedural route. This could translate in practice into a mixture of expert consultation, deliberative analysis, and social-choice theoretic procedures.⁴⁸

Assuming that certain minimal conditions about the nature of collective decision making are met, we could let a democratic process decide which capabilities matter for normative questions related to public policy and social justice.⁴⁹ Yet if we proceed along the deliberative-democratic route to developing the capability approach to affluence and riches, we need to know the scope of the deliberations. Recall that poverty is generally specified at a local or national level: one assesses the standard of living of a certain group against the standard of living of all people living in the area. Poverty and riches are contextual notions: one is poor or one is rich against the background of the context in which one lives.

The same holds for the rich. If we could project ourselves 300 years back in time, while keeping our current material living standards fixed, we would all count as rich, whereas only few of us would regard ourselves as such here and now. Once upon a time being able to buy spices, and hence enjoying spicy meals, was a sign of affluence, since spices were very scarce and hence expensive. Nowadays a wide range of species is available to all at low prices. To be able to enjoy a meal cooked with spices was once a privilege of the rich, but that is no longer the case. Thus, both the selection of the detailed functionings, as well as the decision of where to draw the poverty- and the riches lines, need to be

47 On the selection of capabilities for the purpose of justice, see Nussbaum (2006); Anderson (1999); Claassen & Düwell (2013).

48 Alkire (2007); Robeyns (2006).

49 Space doesn't allow me to defend that view here, but for a defense of this way of thinking about justice, see Forst (2012).

contextualized: They must take account of the time and place in which one is making evaluative judgments of poverty and affluence.

Yet the list of relevant functionings would need to be limited in one important sense: It would only entail those functionings that are considered part of the standard of living or the material side of quality of life, rather than the broader notions of quality of life or well-being. A comprehensive account of quality of life would also include functionings that do not have a material basis, but that belong more to the political, social, or spiritual dimensions of life. If we need an account of riches for the purposes of developing a distributive rule, it is important that we limit our conceptualization of quality of life to those dimensions that are directly related to one's income level. Obviously, this doesn't mean that the nonmaterial dimensions of quality of life, such as one's opportunities to be active in local politics, or the capabilities of being part of a religious community and engaging in its practices, are any less morally important. Rather, the underlying rationale is that the concept of riches should not capture everything that is worthwhile, and we should try to not confuse different components of quality of life. By keeping the material and nonmaterial dimensions of quality of life distinct, we can allow for the possibility that a very rich person could be lonely and unhappy, but also that a middle-class person could feel incredibly blessed by her friends and family and all the joy and meaning that she derives from her regular walks in the woods. The latter may *feel* rich, or *self-describe* as rich, but a political redistributive doctrine is therefore not warranted to count her as being rich.

The process of deciding which functionings are important for the conceptualization of the riches threshold would require a careful outline of how to make that process as legitimate as possible, and how to prevent biases in that process (e.g., power imbalances among the deliberators). This raises a host of different questions that are addressed in the literature on deliberate democracy and participatory techniques.⁵⁰ Yet in order to get an initial, very rough idea of what one could expect to emerge from such a process, we could look at the existing literature on the selection of functioning for the standard of living in a Western European

⁵⁰ For example, Breena Holland (2014) provides an empirically informed theoretical analysis of the substantive conditions that such deliberations should meet in the context of the capabilities that need to be protected by environmental regulation.

country.⁵¹ This literature suggests that something like the following list of capabilities could emerge from such a participatory process: physical health, mental health, personal security, accommodation, quality of the environment, education, training and knowledge, recreation, leisure and hobbies, and mobility. Each of these broad, general functionings should then be specified in more detail, by working out which more detailed and specified functionings would be entailed by each of the more general functionings.

For each of these broad, general functionings, the deliberative decision-making process should then specify the riches line, by answering the following question: Which levels of capabilities do we think it is reasonable for people to claim for a fully flourishing yet not excessive life? The answer to this question will depend on the context—on the relevant time and space. I conjecture that in contemporary Europe or North America, we would answer this question by stating, for example, that one must have access to the goods that enable one to be mobile within a radius of a few hundred miles: Hence, one must either be able to afford a decent car, or have access to public transport that enables the same functioning—but one wouldn't need to have access to a private jet. Being able to fly to the other side of the continent on a regular basis wouldn't fall under the capabilities of the flourishing-but-non-rich life.

Once we have listed the capabilities to which we should have access for a flourishing but non-rich life, we can calculate how much money would be needed for a typical person (with $CF = 1$) to buy these goods and services. That amount gives us the riches line (RL), which is expressed in a monetary unit. For example, if our estimate is that in order to have access to these functionings related to a fully flourishing but non-rich life we need 200,000€ a year, then the riches line is put at 200,000€.

Anyone whose PMR is greater than the riches line has more resources than she needs for a fully flourishing life and therefore counts as rich. This is what I call the PMR-account of riches.

Before closing this discussion of the PMR-account of riches, I want to offer two remarks. First, note that this account of riches doesn't leave it

51 Robeyns (2005, 2006).

to each individual person to decide whether she is rich or not. Rather, I believe that such matters should be open to public debate, whereby the role of the philosopher is to put proposals on the table for that debate and provide citizens with arguments in defense of a certain proposal. It is to be expected that compared with the PMR-account of riches, some people who do not consider themselves rich could be identified as rich. This would not be surprising if it is true that people who are rich according to the PMR-account are not always aware of how affluent they are.

Second, note also that making a distinction between an affluent life and the life of the rich doesn't mean that a non-rich person can never have access to a functioning that the deliberation process has decided falls outside the scope of the fully flourishing life. For example, the conceptualization would *not* imply that those who count as non-rich can never fly to join a party on the other side of the continent: It only implies that since that capability falls outside the range of capabilities to which we think one should have access as a matter of a flourishing-but-non-rich life, a person wanting to fly somewhere for the weekend would need to sacrifice some resources that she could, in her flourishing life, have spent on other goods and services that fall within the scope of the non-rich qualify of life.

5.4. Two Objections to the PMR-Account of Riches

The *ecological sustainability objection* argues that the PMR-account of riches doesn't allow us to draw a distinction between qualitative features of people's spending patterns: The account doesn't consider *how* people spend their money. Yet for ecological reasons surely it matters a great deal whether people use their PMR to attend yoga classes, buy an SUV, or fly on a regular basis. The PMR-account of riches doesn't tell us anything about people's ecological footprint. Isn't that a relevant moral consideration when we decide who counts as rich and who doesn't? If two people have the same PMR but one spends it in a sustainable way and the other doesn't, surely that must be taken into account somehow?

The ecological sustainability objection makes a valid normative point but ultimately fails as an objection to the conceptualization of riches. The valid point is that from a moral point of view it matters how people spend their money.

Yet that is analytically a separate issue: We may also endorse sustainability-relative normative claims that put additional constraints on our morally acceptable behavior. For example, John Broome has argued that we have a moral duty of justice to reduce our carbon footprint to zero.⁵² Yet this is *an additional* constraint on whatever distributive claim we want to defend. The limitarianism defended in this chapter is money-limitarianism; but this doctrine could be supplemented with an additional account of “ecological-resources-limitarianism.”⁵³ A person can be rich or non-rich, and can violate or not violate moral duties related to ecological sustainability concerns. Having or not having too much, and damaging or not damaging the ecosystem too much, are separate issues, although there are probably empirical correlations between the two.

The second objection, the *fertility objection*, is partly similar in structure to the ecological sustainability objection, but it cuts deeper. This objection states that the conceptualization of riches defended in this chapter provides positive fertility incentives, since those who have more children can acquire much more income and assets before they count as rich.⁵⁴ One version of the fertility objection sees positive fertility incentives as a bad thing, given worries about overpopulation and the net ecological burden that each additional life represents. Yet this version of the fertility objection can be rebutted in the same way as the ecological sustainability objection: There may well be quantitative moral limits to our procreative behavior, but this is best conceptualized as an additional constraint on any normative claim related to the upper tail of the PMR-distribution. A family with six children may fall just below the riches line and therefore not qualify as rich, yet we may have independent reasons regarding why it is morally objectionable to have six children, or why the government is morally justified in implementing policies that aim at limiting the number of children we have.⁵⁵ This is a separate question.

Yet the second version of the fertility objection may cut deeper still. This objection states that in post-industrial societies, one needs to be

52 Broome (2012).

53 See, e.g., claims related to the ecological footprint, or Broome (2012).

54 I am grateful to Zofia Stemplowska and Andrew Williams for pressing these objections.

55 See, e.g., Conly (2005); Overall (2012).

fairly affluent before one can afford to have children.⁵⁶ If children are taken into account when calculating the per capita PMR, we may obtain counterintuitive results. Take two couples, A and B, who each form a family. Both families have the same PMR, and both qualify as being middle class and hence as non-rich families. While family A finds that it doesn't quite reach the level of affluence needed to have children and be able to provide them with a decent life, family B has four children and a net family income level that is much higher than family A's. If the parents in family B had not had children, the parents of family B would have qualified as rich. Yet since in the calculation of family B's PMR a lot of expenditures for childcare are deduced and the household income is regarded as the income of six persons rather than that of two, family B doesn't count as rich either. Isn't it deeply counterintuitive to say that family B is non-rich, whereas the parents in that family clearly have enough material means to support four children?

While the pull of this objection is clear, I think we must nevertheless resist it. The reason is that for purposes of determining our material standard of living, each person counts as a moral equal, including children. The fertility objection regards children as the object of the decisions or choices of their parents, in the same way that parents can decide to buy a dog or a car. Yet such a view violates the moral stance in which children are seen as members of our moral community who count on equal terms when we make per capita assessments, such as in the case of deciding who counts as rich. The most we can say about family B is that this family was rich before it decided to have children, or could have been rich had it decided not to have children, but is no longer rich after it had its four children. Children are not part of the material standard of living that makes up our affluence—rather, they are just additional human beings among which this affluence needs to be divided.

Note also that the second version of the fertility objection would also lead to deeply counterintuitive results if we were to apply it to the case of poor people. Suppose a poor family could have stayed just above the poverty line if it had not had any children. But surely the presence of those children does not prompt us to categorize this family as non-poor. Rather, we may believe that their procreative decisions have plunged

56 The claim that raising children is costly is supported by empirical evidence. See Folbre (2008).

this family into poverty, or believe that if the parents in this family had decided not to have children they could have remained non-poor. But these are clearly different claims to the one stating that this poor family must be considered non-poor since the presence of the children makes the difference between poverty and non-poverty.

6. A Moral or a Political Doctrine?

So far the argument has remained silent on the question of whether limitarianism is merely a moral or also a political doctrine. The choice for either makes a significant difference. Limitarianism as a merely moral doctrine means that we have a moral duty not to be rich. If we are rich, we are violating a moral norm, but there is no coercive power, such as the state, that can force us to comply with the norm. Limitarianism as not only a moral but also a political doctrine is much more radical, as it means that the state should tax away any surplus money that people have, or reform social and economic institutions in such a way that no one gains any surplus money in the first place.⁵⁷ Should we defend limitarianism as a moral or as a political doctrine?

The answer to this question will depend on the justification one gives for limitarianism. If the grounding of limitarianism were a virtue-ethical account of the good life, then it could be argued that limitarianism is merely a moral and not a political doctrine. Yet the justifications I have developed in this chapter are political justifications, concerned with the value of democratic equality and with social and distributive justice.

Since on this account limitarianism is a distributive rule of justice rather than of beneficence or personal virtues, there is a *prima facie* case to be made for understanding limitarianism as a political doctrine. After all, following Rawls, justice is generally regarded as the first and most important virtue of society, and if justice includes limitarianism (whatever other distributive rules may additionally apply below the wealth-line), then limitarianism should be a political doctrine.⁵⁸ A moral doctrine wouldn't suffice, since as a moral norm limitarianism is

⁵⁷ Perhaps if societies were reformed according to the lines of "property-owning democracies," this could be the case. For an introduction to the idea of a property-owning democracy, see O'Neill & Williamson (2012).

⁵⁸ Rawls (1999).

non-enforceable, and we would not be able to take coercive measures against those not complying with the limitarian duty.

One could object to this argument for seeing limitarianism as a political doctrine by appealing to concerns of non-compliance. We have to take into account that citizens will not all have a fully developed sense of justice, or will not endorse the view that justice is the first virtue in society, so the objection goes. One could therefore argue that in non-ideal circumstances, limitarianism as a moral doctrine may be the best we can hope for. This is compatible with the view that in ideal theory limitarianism should be a political doctrine, whereby limitarianism as a moral doctrine should be implemented as a step in the direction of limitarianism as a political doctrine. While this all sounds plausible, it doesn't seem enough of a reason to give up on limitarianism as a political doctrine: A doctrine is not a law that a philosopher-dictator can implement, but rather a view for which the philosopher gives the best arguments she can come up with. From that perspective, limitarianism has to be a political doctrine, and it is up to citizens (one of which will be the philosopher) to try to convince their fellow citizens that this is a doctrine for which we have good arguments.⁵⁹

A second objection to seeing limitarianism as a political rather than a moral doctrine relates to the ultimate concern underlying its justification based on the argument from unmet urgent needs. Given that specific justification, we may ask whether these urgent unmet needs will be better met if limitarianism is considered a political or a moral doctrine. One shouldn't simply assume that governments are more effective, or indeed equally effective, in meeting these urgent needs than non-governmental actors. This is an empirical question. Yet to the extent that NGOs, technology developers, organizations, and communities are more effective than governments in meeting these urgent needs, we have a reason to modify our limitarian account rather than to abandon it as a political account. One could develop a limitarian doctrine, whereby the "deductible gifts" in the definition of modified income would include monetary gifts to non-governmental agents who aim at meeting these urgent needs. If we have reasons to believe that non-governmental agents are more effective in meeting those unmet urgent needs than governments, then this modified account of limitarianism leaves the

59 Walzer (1981).

rich with the choice of whether to contribute to meeting urgent needs through non-governmental agents (via tax-deductible gifts) or through the government (via taxation).

Weighing these various arguments, I believe that limitarianism should be defended as a political doctrine. Of course, this doesn't prevent the simultaneous development of a culture of giving among the very affluent who do not qualify as rich. Here too, the government can take measures to create and strengthen the social norms that accompany the moral norm embodied in limitarianism, by supporting and publicly praising gift-giving on the part of the almost-rich, and through various other mechanisms that are at a government's disposal to create and strengthen a social norm.⁶⁰ Moreover, on the view that governments are not the only agents of justice,⁶¹ we could also expect those agents of justice that endorse limitarianism, independently of the government, to take initiatives to change social norms and collective practices into limitarianism-supporting directions.

7. Two Objections against Limitarianism

Unsurprisingly, various objections can be raised against limitarianism. Given space constraints, here I will address the two objections that seem *prima facie* to be the strongest.⁶²

The first objection, the *unequal opportunities objection*, holds that limitarianism deprives persons of equal opportunities, and should therefore be rejected. This objection starts from the widely shared normative premise that in a just society everyone should have equal opportunities.⁶³ If a person chooses to forgo leisure in order to work more, which generates surplus money that she can use to obtain luxurious items, then she should have the opportunity to do so. Limitarianism creates inequality of opportunity, and should therefore be rejected.

60 Bicchieri (2006).

61 Weinberg (2009).

62 Another important objection is that the entire approach developed in this chapter, which looks at the *effects* of wealth and riches (and hence has quite a strong consequentialist flavor), is mistaken. Rather, we should analyze whether the rich should be entitled to their wealth by investigating whether they *deserve* it. This objection will not be addressed here, since it requires a paper of its own.

63 Dworkin (1981b).

Note that one might think this is a straw man objection, since it is the *rewards* of particular opportunities that are withheld from individuals, rather than the opportunities themselves. The rich can still be CEOs of major international companies, but they can no longer earn millions on a yearly basis. The objection would hold that they still have the same opportunity (to be a CEO), but not the rewards associated with that opportunity. However, I use the term “opportunity” here in its richest sense, that is, as particular states of affairs that are no longer accessible to particular individuals, due to the imposition of the limitarian view. It is not merely reduced earnings that are important, but also what those earnings could be used to obtain (leisure activities, luxury goods, status symbols, etc.). The unequal opportunities objection thus focuses on comprehensive changes in the opportunity sets of individuals that are caused by limitarianism.

The unequal opportunities objection is correct in claiming that those at the top of society will see their opportunities curtailed. But this is the price we pay for something more important, namely the widening of opportunities for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, all those who will benefit from financial investments in ameliorating any of the three empirical conditions that make up the circumstances of limitarianism. The global poor will benefit from poverty-reducing strategies and see a broadening of their opportunities toward better lives. The disadvantaged in affluent societies will benefit from disadvantage-reducing policies such as more accessible mental health services, or living arrangements for the homeless. Those living in areas where the harms of global warming will be greatest, such as inhabitants of small islands or the large deltas, as well as people living in the future, will see their opportunities increased to live without the harmful effects of increased global warming. I thus reject the unequal opportunities objection on the grounds that in the highly unjust and ecologically fragile world in which we live, limitarianism would curtail some opportunities for the best-off, but in order to increase the opportunities for those who have a far more restricted range of initial opportunities. In ideal theory, the unequal opportunities argument may perhaps have some force,⁶⁴ but in the non-ideal circumstances in which we live, limitarianism would

64 Although even in a world in which everyone complies with the principles of justice, equality of opportunity over the lifetime may be an elusive ideal, and we may have

move us closer to equality of opportunity, rather than moving us away from it.

The second objection, the *incentive objection*, starts by noting that if limitarianism is justified with the argument for unmet urgent needs, then its goal is not to punish the rich, since there is no moral badness in being rich in itself. Rather, the goal is to meet the unmet urgent needs that are captured by the three conditions that form the circumstances of limitarianism. Yet if the ultimate motivation is meeting these urgent unmet needs, why not endorse the Rawlsian difference principle in a slightly modified form? After all, if there is a moral duty to give away all surplus income, then there is a very strong disincentive to add to the social product after one's income has reached the wealth line. Surely the meeting of urgent needs is not helped if the rich face strong disincentives to earn an income above the wealth line in the first place? The difference principle would weaken this disincentive, since it allows the rich to become richer as long as the poor benefit too. In Rawls's theory, the difference principle states that in the design of the basic social and economic institutions in society, inequalities in social primary goods are allowed as long as they benefit the worst-off group in society.⁶⁵ A modified difference principle could be applied, not to the design of the basic institutions but to income redistribution, and could replace social primary goods with the modified income metric. Wouldn't this distributive rule better serve the ultimate justification for advocating limitarianism?

That conclusion doesn't quite follow. Limitarianism is agnostic about the distribution below the wealth line, such as legitimate inequalities among the non-rich, but is more radical with respect to what distributive justice requires at the top end of the distribution. Under the difference principle, a person could be rich and have a lot of surplus money, yet from any additional money he would earn, only a small fraction would have to go to the worst-off. The limitarian principle wouldn't allow this: All surplus money would have to go toward the unmet needs of the worst-off, the disadvantaged, and toward addressing urgent collective-action

to rethink the rejection of equality of outcome that took place in political theory over the last two decades. See, among others, Phillips (2004) and Chambers (2009).

65 Rawls (1999, 52–56).

problems. Limitarianism shares with the difference principle a strong redistributive aim, but the two are distinct.

Yet the opponent of limitarianism may try to attack from a slightly different angle. Perhaps the incentive objection cuts deeper, if it is stated directly without reference to the difference principle. Surely it must be the case that limitarianism entails a very strong disincentive for almost-rich people to contribute more to the creation of the social product by working harder, innovating smarter, and doing more business? The objection here refers to the idea of optimal income taxation, as it is known in public economics. The consensus view among public economists is that the so-called optimal top marginal taxation rate, which is the rate at which total tax revenues are maximized, is about 70%. If one further increases the top marginal taxation rate, then total tax revenues decrease. To the extent that limitarianism is seen as a fiscal policy (and not as an ideal that should guide pre-distribution institutional design or charitable duties), limitarianism equals a top marginal taxation rate of 100%.

This is a serious challenge for the arguments developed in this chapter.⁶⁶ The democratic argument is untouched by the fact that the optimal top marginal taxation rate is lower than 100%, since the democratic argument cares about political equality, not about maximal tax revenue that can be used to meet the unmet urgent needs. Hence, if we only care about the value of political equality, we should not lower the top marginal taxation rate below 100% as long as the latter can be shown to lead to more political equality.

In contrast, the argument from unmet urgent needs could be significantly undermined if the optimal top marginal taxation rate is less than 100%. Since the grounding value is the meeting of the unmet urgent needs, the rational thing to do, *as a matter of policy only concerned with the meeting of the unmet urgent needs*, is to weaken limitarianism such that we raise maximal tax revenues among the rich and richest.

The first thing this shows is that there can be a tension between different reasons for limitarianism. The argument from unmet urgent needs would imply that we should opt for the optimal tax rate, whereas the democratic argument would rather forgo some tax revenue if an

⁶⁶ I am grateful to John Quiggin for pressing me on this point.

orthodox implementation of limitarianism better protects political equality. There is thus a certain tension between the two arguments for limitarianism that have been developed in this chapter. Two things follow. First, we need to ask whether there are other reasons for limitarianism, so that we can examine whether there are additional tensions between those arguments and their practical implications. Second, as far as the tension between the argument from unmet urgent needs and the democratic argument is concerned, we have four options. The first is to opt for a revenue-maximizing fiscal policy, together with a set of institutional reforms that breaks down the mechanisms that turn money into political power. Perhaps the residue of unequal opportunity of political influence that remains in that ideal scenario is sufficiently small that we need not worry. This is an empirical question that needs to be investigated. The second option would be to maintain that unequal political influence still matters but that addressing urgent unmet needs trumps the democratic argument, and therefore choose the revenue-maximizing fiscal policy. The third and fourth options are symmetrical to the first and second. In the third option we choose orthodox limitarianism (a 100% top marginal tax rate above the riches line), which fully protects political equality, and try to indirectly meet the urgent unmet needs by means other than fiscal policies, e.g., by calling on non-governmental agents of justice or entrepreneurs to tackle issues of urgent unmet needs. In the fourth option we maintain that meeting the urgent unmet needs still matters but that addressing political equality trumps the meeting of the urgent unmet needs, and hence feel justified in opting for the 100% top marginal tax rate.

If we care more about meeting unmet urgent needs than about the damage done to political equality due to the effects of surplus money, then the fiscal policy that comes closest to the limitarian ideal should be an income and wealth top tax rate that maximizes tax revenue. Yet this should not be regarded as a defeat of the limitarian view. First, limitarianism *as a moral ideal* would be unaffected, and we should encourage a social ethos among those who, after taxation, still have surplus money, to give it away toward the meeting of unmet urgent needs. Second, we should investigate non-monetary incentive systems for avoiding the disincentive effects on the rich of high marginal taxations. In a culture where material gain is not the leading incentive,

people may also work hard and harder due to commitments, challenges they have set themselves, or intrinsic joys, esteem, or honor.

I conclude that the unequal opportunities objection does not succeed, but that the incentives objection should prompt us to adapt limitarianism as applied to fiscal policies in line with optimal taxation design, to the extent that we weight the value of meeting the unmet urgent needs higher than the effects of surplus money on the undermining of political equality. Still, in both cases limitarianism as a moral principle stands.

8. Limitarianism: A Research Agenda

In this chapter, I have introduced limitarianism as a distributive rule, and analyzed two arguments in support of limitarianism. By way of a conclusion, I want to stress limitarianism's main limitations and draw out some questions that need to be addressed in further research, which require further analysis (in addition to the various issues that have already been mentioned throughout the chapter).

First, recall that I have argued for non-intrinsic limitarianism, while remaining silent on the plausibility of intrinsic limitarianism. Whether convincing reasons for intrinsic limitarianism can be given remains to be seen. For example, how plausible is the view that one would lead a better life, or a happier life, or a more virtuous life, if one were not to become rich? And how exactly would an argument supporting such a claim unfold?

Second, there are various assumptions in the arguments developed in this chapter that I believe are plausible, but for which I may not have argued in sufficient detail. These assumptions need to be analyzed more carefully, together with their implications for the plausibility of the limitarian doctrine.

Third, it would be good to know exactly how the limitarian distributive rule differs from other distributive rules, such as equality of outcome, equality of opportunity, sufficiency, priority, and the Rawlsian difference principle. Many of these rules have been developed in a variety of ways, and a detailed analysis of the differences between limitarianism and these various distributive rules would be needed. It may turn out that certain limitarian views (that is, certain specifications of limitarianism, including its justification) boil down to an already existing distributive view, or are compatible with an existing distributive

view. Most existing distributive rules focus specifically on *recipients*, yet the particular version of limitarianism that I have defended in this chapter focused equally on *those who carry obligations*. While the distinction between recipients and contributors is not always easy to make in views of distributive justice, the fact that these two concerns exist makes it possible that some recipient-oriented accounts of distributive justice could be complemented with the limitarian rule. This needs to be analyzed in future work. One particular question that requires attention is how limitarianism relates to the understanding of sufficiency in terms of a shift in the reasons we give for caring about benefits below and above the threshold, rather than the more dominant understanding of simply caring that everyone has enough.⁶⁷

Finally, one can observe that more work has been done in empirical political science on the rich (in discussions on oligarchy and plutocracy),⁶⁸ and in welfare economics on the measurement of the top incomes, than in normative political philosophy. In my view, it would be helpful if normative political philosophy connected more strongly with those empirical debates and introduced a stronger focus on the rich in theories of justice and normative political philosophy in general. There are very likely to be other reasons, as well as those discussed in this chapter, why the distinction between the rich and non-rich should play a much more prominent role in normative arguments and theories of justice in particular. The modified income account of wealth developed in this chapter can be used for a wide range of wealth-referring claims, and the principle of limitarianism can be combined with additional recipient-oriented principles of justice or with distributive rules about those parts of the distribution below the wealth line.

Obviously there will be various other accounts of wealth and various other justifications for limitarianism. I have defended one particular account of wealth and have argued for limitarianism as a political doctrine based on the democratic argument and the argument from urgent unmet needs, yet I have conceded that the argument from unmet urgent needs would force us to weaken limitarianism in the fiscal domain into a set of policies that maximizes taxation revenue among the rich. Still, whether this modified income account is the best account

⁶⁷ On the alternative interpretation of sufficientarianism, see Shields (2012).

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Hacker & Pierson (2010) and Winters (2011).

of wealth, and whether the democratic argument and the argument for unmet urgent needs are the best arguments for limitarianism, remains to be seen.

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3. Limits to Wealth in the History of Western Philosophy

Matthias Kramm and Ingrid Robeyns

1. Introduction

In recent years, there have been several calls by writers, activists and politicians to put upper limits on what an individual can earn or own. For example, on 2nd March 2018, Kaniela Ing, an American politician, published a tweet stating: ‘At what point is someone’s wealth acquisition too much—\$1b, \$10b, \$100b, \$1t? Mark my words: this moral question will be very, very important in coming years. We need leaders who are brave enough to ask it.’ The labour rights activist Sam Pizzigati (2018) has recently called for a maximum wage, which he sees as a step towards the ultimate goal of having a world without the super-rich. And the influential writer George Monbiot (2019) has called for an upper limit to wealth as a solution to the global climate crisis.

At the same time, philosophers have also started to investigate the idea that there should be a strict upper limit to how much wealth a person or household can possess and that in an ideal situation no-one would be super-rich (Robeyns 2017; Neuhäuser 2018; Volacu & Dumitru 2018; Zwarthoed 2018; Timmer 2019). This view, which Ingrid Robeyns (2017) dubbed ‘limitarianism’, holds that there should be an upper limit to how much material possessions a person can have.¹ Limitarianism is clearly a normative view, but could be either an ethical view (which can guide us on how we should live a good life) or a moral view (which

¹ Limitarianism is the view that no-one should enjoy more than an upper limit of some valuable goods or resources. In this paper, we only focus on economic limitarianism; yet limitarianism is also applicable to other distributions of value, such as limits to the use of an ecosystem’s resources.

addresses issues concerning the right actions and right institutions), and hence could also be a partial view on social justice. Limitarianism remains agnostic regarding what justice would require below the upper limit, but a fully worked out view of social and distributive justice will require that additional distributive principles, such as an efficiency-sensitive equality of opportunity concept and/or a lower sufficiency threshold, are combined with the upper threshold.

Does the idea of upper limits to wealth have historical predecessors? That is the question we seek to address in this article. We will investigate which proto-limitarian ideas are present in the history of economic and political philosophy. We understand proto-limitarian ideas to be historical claims and arguments that advocate for some form of limits to individual wealth acquisition and owning. These proto-limitarian arguments are not necessarily exactly the kind of claims that politicians and activists are now calling for, or that contemporary philosophers are analysing, but they might be interpreted as close relatives. Whether this is the case remains to be seen and is the topic of this article. We will discuss the relevant views of several authors in the canon of Western thought: Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and John Maynard Keynes. Our reading of these authors shows that proto-limitarian claims have been made in at least four distinct domains of moral analysis: in moral psychology (the insatiability claim, Section 2), moral reasoning (the means–ends claim, Section 3), virtue ethics (the claims of temperance and/or liberality, Section 4) and political morality (the claims of necessities and superfluities, Section 5). In Section 6, we ask what can be learnt that is relevant to present-day discussions.

We grant that this article is limited because we restrict ourselves to the canon of Western philosophy. When we were selecting which authors to discuss, we chose those philosophers that we believe are regarded as canonical in relation to questions about possessing and riches.² Clearly, this has led to a gender bias in this selection, since for

2 We consulted with our colleagues who teach history of philosophy, as well as with a few colleagues outside our own university, to check whether we had overlooked a thinker who should have been included based on the criteria we used. We thank the referee for the suggestion to include the Stoics, whom we included in revisions yet are, in our view, not as proto-limitarian as is sometimes believed. No other names were mentioned as key figures that we had left out.

various reasons female philosophers have often been denied inclusion in the canon. For example, Sophie de Grouchy (1798) argued against excessive wealth since it could lead to rich people acting unjustly and could also jeopardise the proper functioning of the legal and political order. In addition, academic philosophy has in recent years become increasingly aware that much of our discussions exclude non-Western philosophies (e.g. Garfield & Van Norden 2016). There is no doubt that outside the canon of the history of Western philosophy, there are important arguments related to the idea of putting limits on wealth. For example, the great medieval Islamic philosopher Abu Hamid al-Ghazali advocated voluntary sharing in order to avoid poverty and misery on the one hand and extravagance on the other (Ghazanfar & Islahi 1990). Another fascinating example is Jainism, which is not only a philosophy but also a distinctive culture and way of living originating from India, which holds that ‘the premise of wealth accumulation is that surplus wealth will be redistributed voluntarily’ (Rankin 2017, 6). One of the core principles of Jainism is *Aparigraha*, or the commitment of giving and non-possessiveness (Shah 2017, 39). We have nevertheless opted to discuss a selection of thinkers, since we do not aim at completeness but rather want to investigate our hypothesis that there are historical predecessors of the limitarian view. Completeness is not needed to address this question, but even a cursory reading of non-Western philosophy suggests that anyone who wants to acquire a complete overview of limitarian predecessors should certainly also study non-Western philosophies.

So what, then, can we learn from this historical reading of some of the thinkers from the canon of Western thought to give us a better understanding of the contemporary systematic view? In the contemporary literature, it has been argued that limitarianism might be justified based on either intrinsic arguments or non-intrinsic arguments; in the case of the former, it is riches themselves that are morally troubling, while in the latter case, riches give rise to some other morally troubling effects. Robeyns (2017) provides two non-intrinsic arguments for limitarianism, one based on the democratic value of political equality, the other on the value of meeting unmet urgent needs; as this paper shows, both of these arguments have proto-limitarian predecessors. It is not yet clear from contemporary discussions whether in contemporary

pluralist and liberal societies valid and cogent intrinsic arguments can be offered. Yet historically we do find both types of arguments.

Another distinction that can be made is that between limitarianism as a political doctrine and as a moral doctrine. If it is a political doctrine, the state can use its monopoly over violence to impose coercive structures that will impede any person or household from becoming excessively rich. If it is a moral doctrine, there is no coercion involved, but nevertheless an argument is made that giving away one's money until one falls under the limitarian threshold is not supererogatory, but rather a moral duty. In the contemporary literature, the distinction between limitarianism as a moral and a political duty is analytically clear, but as we will show in this paper, historically that was not always the case. The boundaries between moral duties and political duties was not at all clear, especially in the work of Plato and Aristotle, due to their perfectionist political views.

One distinction that emerges from our historical reading but that has not yet been explored in the contemporary literature, is the distinction between a limitarian act, a limitarian policy or institution, and a limitarian distribution. An individual may decide that it is wrong to have a lot of money, and give it away: that would constitute a limitarian act. A policy or institution may be said to be limitarian if it installs an upper limit on the acquisition of money. Such policies or institutions could be strictly limitarian, e.g. impose 100% taxation on income and/or property, or they could be weakly limitarian, whereby a compromise is made between the limitarian goal and other goals, such as efficiency. A distribution may be said to be limitarian if no-one is living above the riches line—in other words, if no-one is super-rich. Yet such a distribution may be caused by very different causal processes—such as large-scale wars that swipe away fortunes, a strong culture of giving or policies such as a maximum wage or a limit to the amount one can inherit. We will return to these distinctions in Section 6 and illustrate them by using the claims and arguments of the canonical authors that we are reviewing in this paper.

Before proceeding, there is an obvious limitation to our paper that we should highlight. We do not aim at giving a complete overview of all the intellectuals who, throughout the history of political and economic thought, have produced proto-limitarian views. We only want to focus on the most prominent thinkers from the canon in order to show the

very existence of proto-limitarian thinking, but we will leave further (and more detailed) analyses to historians of political thought.³

2. The Insatiability Claim

The first claim which we have located in the history of philosophy is first and foremost a psychological one: the claim that human nature is characterised by certain insatiable appetites or desires. Those appetites or desires call for certain restrictions, e.g. putting certain limitations on one's acquisitive behaviour in order to allow for a life and a society which are not dominated by those desires. But a structural reinterpretation of the insatiability claim also exists which relies on a different anthropological assumption. According to this structural version of the insatiability claim, human psychology is determined by the prevalent economic system. Hence, insatiability is not primarily rooted in human nature but can be traced back to economic structures.⁴ Neither the psychological nor the structural claim regarding insatiability by themselves constitute an argument in favour of limitarianism. They merely provide an explanation for excessive accumulative behaviour. But an additional normative choice is to tackle this behaviour by recommending a limitarian act, a limitarian policy or institution, or a limitarian distribution.

The psychological version of the insatiability claim is clearly articulated in Plato's *Republic* when Socrates explicates his doctrine of the tripartite soul:

The first, we say, is the part with which a person learns, and the second the part with which he gets angry. As for the third, we had no one special name for it, since it's multiform, so we named it after the biggest and strongest thing in it. Hence we called it the appetitive part, because of the intensity of its appetites for food, drink, sex, and all the things associated with them, but we also called it the money-loving part, because such

3 For example, the historian Annelien De Dijn (2020) has recently argued that the early republican thinker James Harrington defended a form of limitarianism in his book *The Commonwealth of Oceana*.

4 Marx may be the most prominent proponent of the structural version of the insatiability claim, but Scott Meikle attributes a similar claim to Aristotle, namely that insatiability emerges with the institutionalisation of money.

appetites are most easily satisfied by means of money. (Plato 1997b, 580d–581a)

Aristotle takes up this tripartite view of the soul. Although he does not speak at length about greed or insatiable appetites in *De anima*, he nevertheless writes that appetite can be found in all three parts and ‘does not have a deliberative faculty’ (Aristotle 2016, 434a10). In *Politics*, he adds that appetite can lead to insatiable desires. The insatiable desire for life is based on the appetite of the third part of the soul, which is concerned with nutrition and reproduction:

But the fundamental cause of this state of mind is concern about living, rather than about living well; and since their desire for that is unlimited, their desire for the things that produce it is equally unlimited. (Aristotle 1998, 1257b35)

Aristotle discusses greed mainly in the context of money-making. Thus, it may look as if in his view greed is dependent on the institution of money. This reading of Aristotle as considering money and monetary exchange as inherently evil is supported by Scott Meikle (1995, 76). Furthermore, money is easy to store and does not spoil and therefore makes accumulation possible in the first place (Walsh & Lynch 2008, 68). Ryan K. Balot’s reading of *Politics* suggests another conclusion, however: greed does not originate in trading activity or coinage but in ‘human beings’ irrational attachment to the body’ (Balot 2001, 43). Although we are not able to take a stand in this discussion about the correct interpretation of Aristotle, it seems plausible to distinguish his treatment of money from his treatment of greed. It is still possible that Aristotle considers money as evil for other reasons, though.

Both Plato and Aristotle base their insatiability claims on their respective psychological accounts. Both of them also demand that these appetites should be restrained in one way or another. While they provide arguments to support this claim which fall into the category of intrinsic limitarianism, they also consider the consequences of insatiability for the *polis* and provide non-intrinsic justifications.

According to Plato, the first part of the soul should rule over the third part with the aid of the second part, if the soul is to be healthy. They should preside over ‘the appetitive part, which is the largest part in each person’s soul and is by nature most insatiable for money’ (Plato

1997b, 442a). Only in this way can human beings avoid being distracted from striving to become truly rich, not in gold but ‘in the wealth that the happy must have, namely, a good and rational life’ (Plato 1997b, 521a). Because Plato draws an analogy between a just soul and a just state, he also demands that ‘the better rules the worse’ (Plato 1997b, 431b), whereby the superior classes consist of guardians who exclusively desire wisdom and auxiliaries who are not allowed to have any property. They will supervise the activities of the farmers, craftsmen and traders in the *polis*. Plato’s Socrates identifies the ‘endless acquisition of money’ (Plato 1997b, 373d) as the main cause of civil unrest and war. This is particularly true of an oligarchic system in which there are two cities, ‘one of the poor and one of the rich—living in the same place and always plotting against one another’ (Plato 1997b, 551d). Oligarchs are dominated by their desire for wealth, so their government leads to an unequal distribution and a widening gap between rich and poor citizens. This inequality is liable to erupt into a revolution at some point.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes greed as an appetite ‘for what is pleasant’ (Aristotle 2014, 1119b) and recommends that this appetitive part of the soul should be ruled by reason. If a person is not ruled by reason, she may easily arrive at a mistaken conception of wealth as the highest good, although wealth ‘is merely useful, for getting something else’ (Aristotle 2014, 1096a). Aristotle also agrees with Plato that greed can have bad consequences for the *polis*, especially if the form of government is an oligarchy or a democracy, the former being in the ‘interest of the well-to-do’, the latter in the ‘interest of the poor’ (Aristotle 1998, 1279b4). In these cases, there can be no stability and civic turmoil will follow sooner or later. However, Aristotle criticises Plato’s ideal of the *polis* because it withholds happiness from both the guardians and the lower classes by not enabling them to strive for the higher good (Aristotle 1998, 1264b6). His own recommendation for non-ideal circumstances is to strengthen the middle class and hand over the government to it, because with a numerous middle class ‘there is less likelihood of faction and dissension’ (Aristotle 1998, 1296a7).⁵

In summary, we can say that the intrinsic proto-limitarian arguments of Plato and Aristotle concern not so much the state of being wealthy

5 Yet Aristotle ends up excluding different groups from citizenship as well, e.g. those with commercial occupations.

but rather the activities of human beings who give in to their insatiable appetites. Such behaviour may lead them to be distracted from striving for a good and wise life to dedicating the majority of their activities to accumulating riches at the expense of other more virtuous activities. The non-intrinsic proto-limitarian claims focus on unequal distribution, the gap between poor and rich citizens, and the potential for conflict which emerges from this.

More recent philosophers and economists have also employed the insatiability claim in their reflections on limitarianism. Adam Smith distinguishes between a desire for necessities and a desire for conveniences, Karl Marx offers a structural interpretation of insatiability and John Maynard Keynes differentiates between absolute and relative needs in order to sketch a utopian vision of our society. In the following analysis of their respective versions of the insatiability claim, we will discuss whether they offer intrinsic or non-intrinsic arguments for limitarianism.

Adam Smith bases his distinction between two kinds of desires in his account of human physiology and psychology: 'The desire of food is limited in every man by the narrow capacity of the human stomach; but the desire of the conveniences and ornaments of building, dress, equipage, and household furniture, seems to have no limit or certain boundary' (Smith 1976, 1.181). The desire for food can be satisfied because the human body has a limit to the amount of food that can be consumed. But the desire for conveniences exceeds the body and includes respect and admiration for the whole of the society one lives in. Accordingly, Smith writes that 'the chief enjoyment of riches consists in the parade of riches' (Smith 1976, 1.190). The Scottish philosopher follows Plato and Aristotle in lamenting that the human disposition to admire is often directed towards wealth rather than towards wisdom and virtue. He claims that 'inattentive observers are very apt to mistake the one for the other' (Smith 2004, 73), because the acquisition of wealth as well as the acquisition of wisdom and virtue can help us to be respectable and to be respected. Smith suggests that the acquisition of wealth should be moderated to such fortune as men 'can reasonably expect to acquire' (Smith 2004, 74) so that virtues can flourish as well. Hence, Smith can be interpreted as offering an intrinsic argument for limiting acquisitive behaviour. He also adds a non-intrinsic argument in which he adopts the view of Plato and Aristotle that too much inequality

between the rich and the poor leads to civil unrest. He assigns to the rich the vices of 'avarice and ambition' and to the poor 'the hatred of labour and the love of present ease and enjoyment' (Smith 1976, 2.709) and puts his hope in the middle class, which, according to him, can develop a higher degree of virtue.

In the work of Karl Marx, the insatiability claim is reinterpreted as an effect of the social structures inherent in the capitalist system. Marx describes the disposition to strive for wealth as an end in itself, but explains that this disposition is a consequence of the capitalist mode of production:

Only as a personification of capital is the capitalist respectable. As such, he shares with the miser an absolute drive towards self-enrichment. But what appears in the miser as the mania of an individual is in the capitalist the effect of a social mechanism in which he is merely a cog. (Marx 1990, 739)

Thus, insatiability is not primarily rooted in human physiology or psychology, but is, rather, a structural characteristic of capitalism, which demands a constant increase in capital and incessant competition. Marx criticises classical economic thought for having reaffirmed this '[a]ccumulation for the sake of accumulation', calling it the 'historical mission of the bourgeoisie' (Marx 1990, 742). His version of the insatiability claim is based on a non-intrinsic political argument for limitarianism: structural insatiability is inherent to the capitalist mode of production and this mode of production has to be overcome in order to establish a just society. Marx consequently gives an outline of a first phase of communism, where each worker is awarded according to his or her contribution. In a second, higher, phase of communism, the notion of private property is abolished so that the very idea of limitarianism would no longer be applicable.

A third influential author who advanced the insatiability claim is John Maynard Keynes. In his 'Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren', he distinguishes between two classes of needs: absolute and relative needs. Absolute needs are independent of the situation of our fellow human beings, while relative needs are dependent on our fellows, and their satisfaction 'makes us feel superior' to them (Keynes 2008, 21). According to Keynes, the first class of needs, which is mainly concerned with fulfilling our bodily and material needs, can be satisfied. But the

second class of needs ‘may indeed be insatiable’ (Keynes 2008, 21) as long as mutual competition is possible and superiority is not achieved. Keynes’ essay sketches a utopian vision of our society, in which economic abundance has been reached. Consequently, this vision does not entail any non-intrinsic arguments regarding political equality or unmet urgent needs, since in his utopia political equality would not be a moral worry and all urgent needs would be met. His concern is rather whether human beings would be able to use this ‘freedom from pressing economic cares [...] to live wisely and agreeably and well’ (Keynes 2008, 22). Keynes’ proto-limitarian argument in favour of abandoning our obsession with economic activities is therefore an intrinsic one.⁶

What do we observe when rereading the proto-limitarian arguments of Smith, Marx and Keynes? Smith and Keynes both distinguish between two kinds of desires or needs and argue that only the second kind implies insatiability. Both provide an intrinsic argument for the limitation of acquisitive (Smith) or competitive (Keynes) behaviour as a precondition for a virtuous (Smith) or wise (Keynes) life. Smith further supports his limitarian claim by applying the non-intrinsic argument that unrestrained acquisitive behaviour will lead to inequality and civil unrest. Marx, in contrast, offers a structural reinterpretation of the insatiability claim which forms part of his more general political argument in favour of limitarianism: a just society is a society in which the capitalist mode of production has been abandoned, and with the vanishing of this capitalist mode of production, structural insatiability will disappear as well.

3. The Means–Ends Claim

In addition to insatiability, we have identified a second claim which has been used to defend limitarianism. It concerns a specific means–ends fallacy within the area of moral reasoning. According to this claim, human beings have the tendency to regard money-making as an end

6 Interestingly, there are parallels between Keynes’ utopian vision and Thomas More’s Utopians, who share their property and therefore live in abundance. More distinguishes between basic needs and the need of ‘getting ahead of others by a superfluous display of possessions’ (More 1995, 139). During their early formation, the Utopians learn to despise gold, silver and silk. However, More expresses a considerable degree of scepticism that such a society is viable (More 1995, 247–249).

in itself, although it can never be more than a means to something else. This moral fallacy may lead them to adopt an erroneous conception of the good. As we will show in this Section, means–ends fallacies are part of the proto-limitarian arguments of Plato, Aristotle, Keynes, and Marx and Engels.

In Plato's *Republic*, the means–ends fallacy is introduced in the context of a discussion of the medical arts. According to Plato's Socrates, it is not appropriate for an art to seek the advantage of anything other than its object (Plato 1997b, 342b). Thus, medicine is concerned with the healing of the body, and if a physician performs any medical arts to make money instead of healing her patients, she is acting wrongly.

While Plato only alludes to the means–ends fallacy in passing, Aristotle writes on it in depth both in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and in his *Politics*. The *Nicomachean Ethics* provides the *locus classicus* on the subject:

The life of making money is a life people are, as it were, forced into, and wealth is clearly not the good we are seeking, since it is merely useful, for getting something else. (Aristotle 2014, 1096a)

In this passage, Aristotle is considering the point of view of the individual and his moral conclusion is restricted to individual flourishing: for a human being to flourish, he or she should be clear that money-making is only a means. In *Politics*, Aristotle turns to the consideration of households and criticises the idea that 'mere accumulation is the object of household management' (Aristotle 1998, 1257b35). He distinguishes between two kinds of wealth-getting: Firstly, there is natural wealth-getting which forms a part of household management and consists in acquiring a limited amount of those goods which are 'necessary for life or useful to the association of the city or the household' (Aristotle 1998, 1256b26). Secondly, there is wealth-getting where the amount of goods to be acquired is potentially unlimited and which proceeds by trading goods beyond the confines of one's household. Aristotle condemns the latter as a harmful misunderstanding of wealth-getting where a means is being taken for an end. Consequently, his verdict on individual flourishing can be extended to the flourishing of a household: for a household to flourish, the household manager should be clear that money-making is but a means to an end. According to Aristotle, the business of accumulating wealth for its own sake can have a corrosive effect on other activities once

people believe that ‘to make money were the one aim and everything else must contribute to that aim’ (Aristotle 1998, 1257b35).

In ‘Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren’, Keynes follows Aristotle closely in distinguishing between ‘love of money as a possession’ and ‘love of money as a means to the enjoyments and realities of life’ (Keynes 2008, 23–24). In the utopian society that he describes, the need to dedicate the bulk of one’s life to economic activities has disappeared and the love of money for its own sake can be recognised for what it is: detestable’ (Keynes 2008, 25). Keynes’ argument remains on the level of the individual and does not include the question of household management. His specification of individual flourishing consists in a rather vague appeal to the ‘direct enjoyment in things’ (Keynes 2008, 25).

In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels provide their own version of the means–ends fallacy. It does not refer either to the individual or to the household, but instead to the member of a certain social class, the working class. The fallacy is not a simple misunderstanding but is inherent in the structures of bourgeois society and its capitalist mode of production. According to Marx and Engels, a communist society can bring about the necessary changes to amend these structures: ‘In bourgeois society living labour is merely a means to increase accumulated labour. In communist society accumulated labour is but a means to broaden, to enrich, to promote the whole life of the worker.’ (Marx & Engels 2015, 247)

While a bourgeois society considers the worker a means for the accumulation of capital, in a communist society (first phase) the means–ends relationship is reversed and the accumulation of capital becomes a means to support the life of the worker. Interestingly, Marx and Engels employ a formulation which appeals to a rather broad view of the quality of life and exhibits parallels with Aristotle’s view of human flourishing.

In summary, we can say that Plato, Aristotle and Keynes criticise their versions of the means–ends fallacy in the context of intrinsic limitarianism.⁷ Taking the means for an end can lead to acting wrongly (Plato), limiting human flourishing (Aristotle) or constraining one’s direct enjoyment of things (Keynes).⁸ On the level of household

7 It is important to keep in mind that they do not criticise persons for being rich but for following their uninhibited desire to become rich.

8 One could rightly object that someone could still accumulate riches in order to finance her expensive life projects without committing the means–ends fallacy. The

management, Aristotle alludes to the possibility that such a confusion of means and ends might also have corrosive effects on other activities. This provides a theoretical possibility for a non-intrinsic argument in favour of limitarianism, which he does not flesh out. While in the case of these three authors, the means–ends fallacy is a fallacy within the individual’s or the household manager’s moral reasoning, it takes a structural dimension in the work of Marx and Engels. Here, it is the capitalist as a part of the capitalist mode of production who confuses means and ends. Although Marx and Engels do not appeal to concrete individuals but to members of social classes, their argument retains an intrinsic aspect: reversing the relationship between means and ends increases the quality of life of the worker. But this could also be reconstructed as a non-intrinsic proto-limitarian argument, since a change of structures leads to the worker’s liberation from capitalist oppression.

4. The Claim of Temperance and/or Liberality

A third claim, which has been used to make a case for limitarianism, belongs to the realm of virtue ethics and is closely related to the insatiability claim and the underlying psychology of human appetites. We can find a treatment of the virtue of temperance in Plato’s *Charmides*, in his *Republic* and in the *Laws*. In the *Republic*, temperance is described as ‘a kind of order, the mastery of certain kinds of pleasures and desires’ (Plato 1997b, 430e). In the *Laws*, the rational temperance of the soul (Plato 1997a, 631c) is the second of the divine goods. If we put this virtue into the context of Plato’s conception of the tripartite soul, temperance originates in the faculty of reason and establishes the control of reason over the third part of the soul (Domanski 2003, 6).

However, in the writings of Aristotle, the discussion becomes more complex. On the one hand, Aristotle continues Plato’s discussion of temperance but restricts its sphere to ‘bodily pleasures’ and in particular to ‘the pleasures of touch and taste’ (Curzer 2015, 66). On the other hand, he introduces liberality as a ‘virtue of monetary gift-giving, characterized [...] by an appropriate desire for wealth, but also

means–ends claim does not entail a limitarian position as long as means and ends remain merely formal notions. There has to be a post-materialist, substantive idea of what the end consists in.

by an appropriate desire to help other people' (Curzer 2015, 5). Both virtues are important if one wants to make a claim for limitarianism that is based on virtue ethics. Temperance is related to the acquisition of goods in order to employ them as a means to satisfy one's bodily needs. Liberality is the virtuous means between the immoderate acquisition of money and keeping it, which is guided by an excessive love of riches, and spending too much, which is its opposite excess. While temperance is restricted to one's body and its physical needs, liberality concerns the actions of human beings within the social and economic space. According to Aristotle, the liberal person values wealth not for its own sake 'but because it enables him to give' (Aristotle 2014, 1120b).

Thomas Aquinas follows Aristotle in distinguishing between temperance and liberality. Temperance is again seen as 'chiefly concerned with those passions that tend towards sensible goods, viz. desire and pleasure' (Aquinas 1920, II-II.141.3), while liberality deals with 'man's free-handedness towards others' (Aquinas 1920, II-II.117.2). For Aquinas, liberality does not pertain to temperance but can instead be thought of as forming part of the principal virtue of justice (Aquinas 1920, II-II.117.5). In all three authors' work, the praise of the virtue of temperance can be interpreted as an intrinsic argument in favour of the moral (and not the political) version of limitarianism. In the work of Aquinas, however, the virtue of temperance as a self-regarding virtue is supplemented by liberality and justice as other-regarding virtues, so the combination of these three virtues serves as a non-intrinsic argument in favour of a limitarian distribution. According to that argument, a person should moderate her accumulative behaviour in order to leave enough resources for others.

The virtue of temperance resurfaces in the work of Adam Smith and forms—according to McCloskey—the 'master virtue' of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (McCloskey 2008, 51). In line with his philosophical predecessors, Smith relates temperance to the 'appetites of the body' (Smith 2004, 316) and assigns to it the task of keeping them within certain limits. Rereading Plato, he suggests replacing the common translation of 'sophrosune' as 'temperance' by its translation as 'good temper, or sobriety and moderation of mind' (Smith 2004, 317). But as Smith does not share Plato's and Aristotle's doctrine of the tripartite soul, he has to reinterpret the meaning of this virtue. For him, temperance is 'prudence

with regard to pleasure' (Smith 2004, 350) and it enables us to postpone a present pleasure for the sake of a greater one to come. Consequently, it becomes difficult to read Smith's interpretation of temperance as a critique of the accumulation of property or as an argument in favour of imposing limits on acquisitive behaviour. While Smith's interpretation of temperance remains intrinsic, it does not appeal to a post-materialist notion of human flourishing.

Karl Marx provides a thought-provoking critique of the virtues of temperance and liberality by uncovering their complicity in a capitalist economy. Smith's recommendation to postpone immediate enjoyment is reinterpreted as the virtue of the capitalist not to use up all his revenue but to spend 'a good part of it on the acquisition of additional productive workers, who bring in more than they cost' (Marx 1990, 735). The virtue of liberality, which in Aristotle's and Aquinas's account is oriented towards giving money to others instead of hoarding it for oneself, is now read as a capitalist argument in favour of reinvesting money in the market. Together, both virtues guarantee that capital is neither consumed nor left idle. The reinvestment of money ensures its self-expansion as capital. Marx appeals neither to a utopian social justice nor to the workers' quality of life. He criticises temperance and liberality because of the instrumental roles they fulfil within a capitalist economy. They provide the underlying moral attitudes which keep the system going.

At first sight, there seems to be a paradox between Marx's critique of the insatiability of capitalism and his rejection of temperance and liberality. Yet there is no real contradiction here. Marx and Engels stress that capitalism is able to release enormous productive powers, but they also regard it as a system that is ultimately self-destructive. On the one hand, capitalism brought this enormous productivity about, but on the other hand, it will also be unable to control it or put it to the advantage of all human beings in society. Thus, insatiability is built into capitalism as a destructive force. Since this is Marx and Engels' view of history and the future, temperance and liberality are only distractions and cannot solve the social problems caused by the exploitation that is inherent to capitalism. They therefore reject temperance and liberality and call on the workers to join the revolution that will move history beyond capitalism.

After reviewing the five authors and their treatment of virtue ethics, our conclusion is somewhat ambivalent.⁹ Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas all have a distinct notion about what constitutes human flourishing. In all three cases, this notion goes beyond the satisfaction of bodily appetites, and in the cases of Aristotle and Aquinas it includes the value of giving. With such a notion of human flourishing in place, the virtues of temperance and liberality—if they are taken together¹⁰—can be interpreted as arguments in favour of limitarianism. But in Smith’s moral philosophy, such a notion is absent. His reinterpretation of temperance is consequently also compatible with an endless accumulation of riches, as long as present enjoyment is being postponed for the sake of greater enjoyment to come. Marx’s clear-sighted criticism of temperance within a capitalist economy is therefore justified. His criticism of liberality, in contrast, only works once the social and interpersonal context of the classic virtue is replaced with an economist reductionist view in which there are only economic agents. In that case, giving money to others equals an economic reinvestment of capital. In order to be an argument in favour of limitarianism, temperance seems to require a post-materialist notion of human flourishing. Once the virtue of temperance is disconnected from such a notion, it can also refer to entrepreneurial sobriety, in which the entrepreneur abstains from taking advantage of present investment opportunities because there might be better ones in the future. Consequently, someone could possess the virtue of temperance and still strive to acquire a huge amount of wealth. The virtue of liberality, however, is highly context dependent. If it is associated with justice within a broader context of social interactions, as in the work of Aquinas, it succeeds as an argument in favour of limitarianism. But once

9 While these five authors link the virtues of temperance and liberality either to the psychological or to the structural version of the insatiability claim, the Stoics took a different approach. Rather than countering insatiable desires with virtuous behaviour, they taught their students to regard the question of wealth as indifferent. According to Epictetus, having or not having wealth is not in our control; it is pure coincidence and therefore among the things which lie between the virtues and the vices (Epictetus 2014, 2.19.13). Hence, we can only attain happiness if we ignore riches and learn to ‘live happily even without them’ (Seneca 2010, 18.13).

10 Liberality alone would also apply in the case of extremely rich philanthropists, but it would be difficult to assign both virtues, liberality and temperance, to them. Somebody who wins the lottery can excel in the virtue of liberality by sharing her prize with others, but she would not be temperate if she chose to hoard a very large amount of the money in order to take care of (excessive) future desires.

this connection to justice disappears and it is merely seen in the context of profit-maximising economic transactions, it can also be interpreted as an act of giving which ultimately promotes one's self-interest. Although the virtues of temperance and liberality could still be seen as being supportive of limitarian acts, policies or institutions even if there is no connection to a post-materialist notion of flourishing or a connection to justice, they do not necessarily have to be. Temperance could refer to postponing present investment opportunities with a view to taking advantage of future ones, and liberality could be reduced to advice regarding reinvesting one's money.

5. The Claim of Necessities and Superfluities

The fourth and last claim which supports a limitarian position that we were able to trace in the history of philosophy is a claim about the distinction between necessities and superfluities. In many cases there is a close connection between this claim and the insatiability claim, which deals with absolute and relative needs. Many theories of ethics and theories of political morality invoke a principle of sufficiency—the idea that no-one should suffer because of poverty or destitution. Generally, this view entails a lower threshold level above which every member of a society should be raised (necessaries), but in some cases it also involves an upper threshold above which individual property should be redistributed in one form or another (superfluities). While the lower threshold is usually defined in terms of the means necessary for the survival of oneself, one's household or one's family, and in terms of food, clothing and accommodation, there are different ways of determining the upper threshold. The philosophers who will be analysed in this Section suggest that a diversity of institutional measures is needed to establish those thresholds. Their accounts also offer a variety of intrinsic and non-intrinsic justifications for these limitarian claims. An example of the intrinsic justification is the teleological argument that money should be used for its proper purpose. The non-intrinsic justifications comprise, among other things, the argument that everybody should have equal access to the means for their survival, the argument that wealth creates societal tensions between the rich and the poor, and the argument that status-based consumption should be prevented.

In his last dialogue, the *Laws*, Plato gives a more or less complete limitarian account with a specification of both a lower and an upper threshold. According to this account, 'extreme poverty and wealth must not be allowed to arise in any Section of the citizen-body' (Plato 1997a, 744d). Plato provides a detailed description of the lower threshold which each citizen should meet: everyone should obtain one dwelling near the centre of the country and another one near the outskirts. The size of the pieces of land on which these dwellings are built will vary according to the fertility of the land and its distance to the city. On the basis of this lower threshold, Plato then defines the upper threshold as being 'four times' (Plato 1997a, 744e) this amount. Unfortunately, he does not give any further justification of this number. An indirect reason is given with regard to the way these thresholds can be implemented in laws. Here, Plato recommends a division of the state into 'four permanent property-classes' (Plato 1997a, 744c), of which the highest class meets the upper threshold. Every individual property which exceeds this amount has to be handed over to the state and the gods. Those who disobey the law will incur severe penalties. Plato justifies his limitarian claims by appealing to both intrinsic and non-intrinsic arguments: on the one hand, citizens should not be distracted by economic activities from taking care of their body and of their soul. In this context, Plato even forbids the use of gold or silver in his state (Plato 1997a, 743d). On the other hand, such a law will prevent conflicts between the rich and the poor, which Plato calls 'the greatest plague of all' (Plato 1997a, 744d).

Aristotle does not write about individual property but chooses the household as his basic administrative unit. His discussion focuses mainly on economic questions, and his most important distinction is the one between natural wealth-getting, which 'is part of the management of the household', and another, unnecessary, art of wealth-getting, which 'serves to make money, and that only by the exchange of commodities' (Aristotle 1998, 1257b17). This second art of wealth-getting is particularly concerned with money and seduces many heads of households into accepting the idea that increasing one's wealth is an end in itself. But according to Aristotle, this is a misunderstanding, since the acquisition of 'an unlimited amount of wealth' is not the function of household management (Aristotle 1998, 1257b23). His intrinsic justification for limitarianism is therefore to stop heads of households 'occupy[ing] themselves wholly in the making of money' (Aristotle

1998, 1257b35). Aristotle defines an upper threshold for each household as being where it has all the goods which are ‘necessary for life or useful to the association of the city or the household’ and which are sufficient ‘for a good life’ (Aristotle 1998, 1256b26). He does not explicitly refer to a lower threshold, but his discussion of food and clothing indicates that this threshold might be at the level of mere survival (Aristotle 1998, 1256b15). Aristotle thought of his state as being a society of self-sufficient households and adds that the state ‘should act as a merchant for itself’ (Aristotle 1998, 1327a11). Hence, he advocates a restriction of the pursuit of wealth-getting for its own sake as a policy recommendation.

In contrast to Aristotle, Aquinas does not discuss his limitarian claims in the context of economics, but in the context of almsgiving.^{11, 12} He distinguishes between two cases in which a thing can be called necessary: (a) if a man needs that thing in order to ‘support himself and his children, or others under his charge’ and (b) if that thing is necessary for a man in order to ‘live in keeping with his social station, as regards either himself or those of whom he has charge’ (Aquinas 1920, II-II.32.a6). Everything which goes beyond these two categories can be called (c) superfluous—this is the heading under which Aquinas discusses goods which a man ‘does not need for the time being, as far as he can judge with probability’ (Aquinas 1920, II-II.32.5). These three categories enable us to define a lower and an upper threshold: the lower threshold would consist in owning all the goods which are referred to in category (a), whereas the upper threshold would comprise all goods that are described in categories (a) and (b) taken together.

When and to what extent is someone obliged to give some of his goods to people in need? According to Aquinas, it is good to give of necessities described in (b), but there is no obligation. It would even be inordinate to give of those necessities to the extent that one is not able to keep up with one’s social station any more. Aquinas adds three exceptions to this rule. Firstly, if somebody wants to change his or her state of life (e.g. by becoming a monk or a nun and taking a vow of poverty), secondly, if what is given can easily be recovered, and thirdly,

11 Yet his discussion follows Aristotle in primarily referring to heads of households.

12 Aquinas also discusses whether usury is unjust or unlawful and follows Aristotle in arguing that usury contradicts the ‘proper and principal use of money’ as a means for exchange (Aquinas 1920, II-II.78.1). But he does not define any thresholds in the course of this argument.

if there is extreme indigence in an individual or great need on the part of the common weal (Aquinas 1920, II-II.32.6). In any of those three circumstances, giving the necessities described in (b) *does* become an obligation. Although Aquinas does not discuss it at length, his treatment implies that superfluous goods, that is, those in category (c), should be redistributed to those whose needs are evident and urgent even if those three exceptions do not apply. If we do not do this, we will ‘sin mortally’ (Aquinas 1920, II-II.32.5).

In contrast to Aquinas’s account of almsgiving, John Locke introduces deontological language into his limitarian argument which assigns rights and duties to the corresponding agents. In a first step, Locke provides a theological justification for his lower threshold: God has given the world to humanity in common ‘for the support and comfort of their being’ (Locke 2003, 2.26). This threshold implies self-preservation¹³ and acquisition of private property by working on the land. Determining Locke’s upper threshold is more complex. On the one hand, there is the so-called spoilation proviso, which restricts property to the amount which a person can make use of. What goes beyond that amount and may therefore spoil, because it is neither consumed nor being attended to, ‘belongs to others’ (Locke 2003, 2.31). On the other hand, there is a duty of charity to give to a person to ‘keep him from extreme want, where he has no means to subsist otherwise’ (Locke 2003, 1.42). Interestingly, charity is not conceptualised as a virtue here but as a ‘right to the surplusage’ (Locke 2003, 1.42) of another person’s goods. The upper threshold is therefore dependent both on individual limitations regarding consumption and work and on the social environment of the individual, i.e. whether there are needy persons around who require his or her help. If there are plenty of resources available and everybody has a sufficient share for self-preservation, the upper threshold will be the spoilation proviso. But if there are only a few resources available and some people have less than the sufficient share, the duty of charity may include an obligation to lower the upper threshold to a level below the spoilation proviso. According to Jeremy Waldron’s interpretation of Locke, the rich may not be forced to give from their surplus, but they are called on ‘to stand back and let the poor take what [...] is rightfully

13 Locke also includes the preservation of one’s family in this notion.

theirs' (Waldron 2002, 185). Locke provides an intrinsic argument for his limitarian claims: the 'equality of men by Nature' (Locke 2003, 2.5).

This brings us to the writings of Adam Smith, whose claims about necessities and superfluities (or luxuries) are closely connected to his psychological claims, which we discussed in Section 2. Smith defines his lower threshold as having enough to be 'tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged' (Smith 1976, 1.96). Unfortunately, he does not provide an equally fleshed out definition of an upper threshold. Instead, he appeals to non-intrinsic reasons why inequality should be avoided: he somehow draws a direct connection between the affluence of the few and the indigence of the many,¹⁴ but more important is his appeal to the indignation of the poor, 'who are often both driven by want, and prompted by envy' (Smith 1976, 2.710) to invade the possessions of the rich. His argument therefore resembles Plato's argument regarding civil unrest. To tackle inequality, Smith recommends the institutional device of taxing luxury goods.¹⁵ These taxes have an additional advantage of tending not to raise the price 'of any other commodities except that of the commodities taxed' (Smith 1976, 2.873).

The final author who contributes interesting new aspects to the debate on limitarianism, especially with regard to its justification, is John Stuart Mill. In his writings on political economy, Mill only implicitly refers to a lower threshold as owning the necessities that guarantee a 'healthful existence' (Mill 1970, V.VI.224) and a 'fair chance of desirable existence' (Mill 1970, II.II.3.375). An upper threshold could be derived from his restrictions on acquisitions by way of a bequest or inheritance: such acquisitions should not go beyond a certain maximum, 'which should be fixed sufficiently high to afford the means of comfortable independence' (Mill 1970, II.II.4.378). Goods which surpass that maximum could then be classified as luxuries. Mill provides a few non-intrinsic arguments in favour of his limitarianism: the most important one is that excessive wealth could be redistributed and raise the quality of life of a larger number of persons or could be devoted to 'objects of public usefulness' (Mill 1970, II.II.4.379). A

14 Such a connection would only be necessary if we ignore economic growth which benefits some more than others, but leaves everyone better off.

15 In this context, Berry points to a considerable tension between Smith's praise of opulence and freedom and his criticism of luxury (Berry 1994, 172).

second argument is that it discourages status-based consumption, which does not derive pleasure from the acquired object and only values it as an 'appendage of station' (Mill 1970, V.VI.2.225). Another reason, which Mill only alludes to, relates to a person's character. According to Mill, inheriting a large fortune may lead to vicious behaviour (Mill 1970, II.II.3.374). A last, minor reason, which Mill only mentions, is that some luxuries are stimulants so they may promote excessive consumption and lead to various forms of addiction (Mill 1970, V.VI.3.228). Mill concurs with Smith that taxing luxuries should play an important role in grappling with these issues. In addition, he demands a restriction on 'what [...] one should be permitted to acquire, by bequest or inheritance' (Mill 1970, II.II.4.378).

To sum up, we can first distinguish between different definitions of the lower threshold: all authors refer in one way or another to the means for the survival of oneself and one's (extended) family. Aristotle and Adam Smith mention clothing in addition to food and accommodation, while Plato provides detailed instructions for the assignment of plots of land.¹⁶ Mill, however, prefers to characterise the lower threshold by using the subjective criterion that it should be desirable and the objective criterion that it should be healthful. Not surprisingly, the authors also differ with regard to their definitions of an upper threshold. Plato employs a proportional definition, while Aristotle refers to his teleological conception of the good life. Aquinas introduces the ability to keep up with one's social station as a criterion which is also connected to social responsibilities. Locke refers to an anthropological criterion and a social criterion: the limits of one's ability to consume or to attend to one's property and the presence of people with extreme needs which have to be satisfied. Mill, eventually, specifies this threshold by appealing to one's comfortable independence.

Different institutional measures are proposed to tackle inequality between the rich and the poor: Plato recommends a specific design of society in combination with legal regulations. Aristotle suggests restricting harmful economic activities. Aquinas discusses his thresholds in the context of voluntary and obligatory almsgiving. Locke shares with Aquinas the focus on charity, but strengthens it by adding

¹⁶ In his earlier dialogue, *Republic*, Plato precedes Aristotle and Adam Smith by specifying a list that includes the same three items: food, shelter and clothes (Plato 1997b, 369d).

a rights-based approach. Smith and Mill appeal to taxation as a suitable measure for redistribution (with Mill adding a restriction on bequests or an inheritance).

We can consequently distinguish between those approaches which propose a specific institutional set-up for society, i.e. those of Plato, Aristotle and Locke, and those that leave this question untouched and merely suggest some tool for redistribution, i.e. those of Aquinas, Smith and Mill. The justifications which are offered for these limitarian claims are also very interesting: intrinsic justifications comprise the worry that money might distract from achieving a good life (Plato, Aristotle), compliance with natural and divine law (Aquinas), and the equality of all men by nature (Locke). There is an even greater variety of non-intrinsic justifications: Plato argues that limiting wealth will prevent social conflicts, a line of thought which Smith takes up by referring to the indignation, want and envy of the poor. Mill, in contrast, provides utilitarian and consequentialist arguments such as the greater efficiency of redistributing wealth to a larger number of persons or of using it to maintain objects that are used by the public; the disincentivising of joyless status-based consumption; the vicious effects of sudden, undeserved abundance; and the excessive consumption of stimulants, the marginal utility of which constantly diminishes.

6. What Lessons Can we Draw for the Systematic View?

What lessons can we draw from the arguments for limiting wealth that have been made throughout the history of Western philosophy for the systematic view of limitarianism that is currently being analysed in the philosophical literature? What is striking when reading that history, if one compares it with contemporary discussions about distributive justice and the ethics of limiting personal wealth? Can the historical authors illustrate the relevance of the distinctions made in the first Section of this paper?

First, as mentioned in the Introduction, the two arguments that Robeyns offers in her paper in which she introduced limitarianism to contemporary debates find supporters in the history of philosophy. Robeyns' arguments regarding unmet urgent needs would be supported by the arguments of Aquinas, Locke and Mill, and her democratic

argument for limitarianism would find allies in the arguments of Plato, Aristotle and Smith since they worry that extreme inequalities lead to civil unrest. However, her distinction between a moral and a political duty not to be excessively rich is not a distinction that was dominant in the history of philosophy. In the past, many philosophers blurred the boundaries between moral and political duties, because they didn't endorse the strict distinction between the right and the good that has come to dominate contemporary political philosophy due to its liberal turn.

Second, we also outlined in Section 1 that analytically we can make distinctions between a limitarian act, a limitarian policy or institution, and a limitarian distribution. The brief historical overview we have offered in this paper shows that those distinctions are not only analytically possible to make but are also relevant in the sense that they help us to understand what the landscape of limitarian views looks like. Of course, it is important to bear in mind that the authors we surveyed are not developing a fully fleshed out limitarian position, but are instead providing elements for a limitarian argument. Still, with that caveat in mind, we can see that some of them are advocating a limitarian policy (Smith and Mill). Some are advocating limitarian acts (Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Smith based on virtue ethics and Keynes based on aesthetic enjoyment). Several of these thinkers are proposing specific upper thresholds (e.g. Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke and Mill).

There are also some forms that the limitarian argument takes that have not yet been discussed in the emerging contemporary literature but that do deserve our attention. The first noteworthy insight is that while Marx and Engels are advocating revolution to speed up the transition from capitalism to communism, the envisioned outcome is one in which each will be given according to her needs, and hence the limitless accumulation of wealth that limitarianism objects to will be impossible due to the changing economic system. So perhaps the historical survey should prompt us to add another category to the categories of limitarian acts, policies, institutions and distributions, namely 'economic systems that meet the principle of economic limitarianism'. Moving to contemporary debates, one could similarly ask whether a property-owning democracy (Rawls 2000) or a basic-income society (Van Parijs 1995) would be economic systems that meet the principle of economic limitarianism. The second remarkable feature is that among the

proto-limitarians, two different strands were noticeable—those arguing for limitarianism via predistribution (Plato, Aristotle, Locke) and those arguing for it via redistribution (Aquinas, Smith, Mill). In sum, the proto-limitarian views reveal a rich landscape of types of arguments and claims—an intellectual richness that contemporary debates should be aware of.

A third main observation is that many of the historical arguments centrally endorse a distinction between needs and wants. Yet this distinction has for a very long time almost disappeared from contemporary political philosophy, especially in the theorising about distributive justice (Reader & Brock 2004). Instead, most contemporary theories of distributive justice take (idealised) individual preferences and people's own ideas of their good life as ultimate dimensions of moral concern and derive from these an individual 'metric of justice', which can be, for example, social primary goods, impersonal resources or capabilities. Some specific forms of needs may be accounted for, like those related to disabilities or the unequal distribution of talents in Ronald Dworkin's (1981) theory of equality of resources, but a core feature, which those theories share with economic theory, is that we cannot make judgements about the quality of the preferences that people have, since that would be unjustified in a society in which citizens hold different conceptions of the good and have different sets of ambitions. However, as philosophers working in other areas of practical philosophy have argued, accepting preferences at face value has troubling consequences, too. For example, in the case of environmental ethics, the needs/wants distinction has been argued to be relevant when thinking about questions of unjust inequalities between poor and rich nations, as well as between current and future generations. And a theory of needs does make visible the specific forms of human dependency and vulnerability that need to be acknowledged when thinking about ecological justice (Shue 1993; O'Neill 2011).

The lexical priority given in contemporary theorising to respecting pluralism concerning ideas of the good life in contemporary societies rather than views about what 'the good society' would look like, and the belief that this priority implies that the needs/wants distinction has become obsolete, implies that the authors' arguments reviewed in this paper will be seen as distinctively illiberal and that they are therefore at risk of being regarded as no longer of much use when

thinking about distributive justice for contemporary societies. Since these historical arguments are based on specific theories of the good life, natural/divine law or equality being derived from a divine decree, contemporary political philosophers may be prone to thinking that those ideas are incompatible with a liberal pluralist society. We wonder if that conclusion is premature; instead, we think this is a question that warrants further analysis. An historical awareness of proto-limitarian arguments should prompt scholars developing limitarianism as a contemporary systematic view to question the dominance of theories that deny the legitimacy of making the distinction between needs and wants and giving this distinction a central role in the development of theories of distributive justice, including the limitarian view.

Fourth, several of the historical limitarian views (or their close cousins) stress the role of virtue ethics and of one's character in discussions of the good society. That, too, has to a large extent been lost in contemporary discussions on what the good society is, since the emphasis has shifted to being on institutions and structures. Yet, at the same time, some philosophers have also argued in favour of having limits to the institutional approach in contemporary political philosophy (Sen 2009) or in specific debates, such as the question of whether the state should be the only agent of justice (O'Neill 2001). Similarly, there are influential political philosophers who have stressed the importance of political virtues (Rawls 1993) and of an egalitarian ethos (Cohen 1997). Might there be a role for virtue ethics, or limitarianism as an ethical rather than a political doctrine, which could supplement and possibly strengthen political limitarianism? More in general, do these historical sources prompt us to revisit the view that a political framework should be supplemented by a view of personal virtues as a necessary supplement rather than merely a possible supplement? In current discussions within climate ethics on who should have responsibility for responding to the climate crisis—the state, institutions or individuals—one can see an elaborate discussion on how the 'political' and the 'ethical' enter into a dialogue about the common good. In our view, the historical sources suggest that we should also pursue this approach that combines an analysis of institutions and policies on the one hand with an analysis of virtuous actions on the other.

Our final observation is that the historical arguments had explicit links between debates on distribution and the fulfilment of needs and

discussions of economic systems (Marx, Engels) and concrete economic institutions (Mill). It has been argued that this turn is needed in contemporary political philosophy, which right now is primarily focused on distributive principles (Waldron 2013). In that emerging agenda, the historical arguments for limitarianism can make a contribution. For example, putting a limit on how much wealth one can inherit may seem an outlandish proposal today, but it should make us pause if we learn that one of the founding figures in the history of liberal thought, John Stuart Mill, proposed this, and we should be prompted to consider his arguments. Or from Plato's *Laws* we could derive arguments for proportional wages, whereby a manager should only earn the wage of their employees multiplied by a fixed number. In many countries at the present time, there are discussions on whether such a maximal wage span should be introduced—either as a matter of legal policy or as a matter of organisational ethos. It is instructive to know that these debates are not new, and we should investigate what we can learn from rereading the proto-limitarian arguments of the canonical thinkers we have examined in this article.

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4. Autonomy-Based Reasons for Limitarianism

Danielle Zwarthoed

1. Introduction

On June 15, 2013, Ethan Couch, a Texan teenager, stole two cases of beer from a Walmart store, took the wheel of his father's pickup, drove at 110 km per hour on a rural road where the speed limit was 64 km per hour, got off the road, slammed into three cars and killed four people. Tests revealed his blood alcohol level was three times the legal limit. He had also consumed cannabis and Valium. The prosecutors sought a twenty years prison sentence. Couch's attorney argued that his client had *affluenza*: being raised in a very wealthy family, which never set limits to him, he could not be held fully responsible for his actions. A psychologist testified that Couch was not a responsible agent. The judge accepted the argument and decided Couch needed rehabilitation rather than jail. He granted him a ten-year probation period. The decision triggered a lot of criticisms. Critics pointed out that wealth should not be taken into account in sentence decisions and that such decisions place the wealthy above the law (Eckenroth 2015).

Critics are right to worry about a criminal justice system that applies double standards and punish the same crimes differently depending on whether the culprit is wealthy or poor. However, there might be a grain of truth to the *affluenza* defence. This paper does not submit that *affluenza* is a mental disorder, nor that it is a valid legal defence. Defending these claims is beyond the area of expertise of a philosopher. Nor does the paper aim to investigate the significance of the *affluenza* defence for

the philosophical theory of criminal law and punishment. Its aim is to look at whether the affluenza defence might teach liberal political philosophers something about *distributive justice*. More precisely, if extreme wealth undermines the capacity for individual responsibility (at least in a personal or moral sense, if not in the legal one), then we might hypothesise a negative correlation between high levels of wealth and individual autonomy.¹ Individual autonomy (broadly construed) is a goal most liberal theories aim to secure and promote through a just distribution of advantages. It is thus worth examining whether these theories should not be wary of extreme wealth.

This paper attempts to expand this line of thought and develops an autonomy-based argument for limitarianism. Whilst sufficientarianism affirms it is of primary moral importance that everyone gets enough (Casal 2007; Gosseries 2011), limitarianism affirms it is of primary moral importance that no one gets too much (Robeyns 2017). Ingrid Robeyns provides two instrumental arguments in support of limitarianism. According to Robeyns, in our world, limitarianism is instrumental to the achievement of two valuable goals, democratic equality and meeting the poor's urgent needs (Robeyns 2017, sec. 3 and 4). Robeyns' argument may be classified as an other-regarding justification of limitarianism. This paper pursues a different argumentative strategy. It does not address the question of whether a person's having too much prevents others from receiving their fair share of democratic power and material wealth. The question this article focuses on is whether a person's having too much prevents this very person from accessing a specific good. Hence this is a self-regarding justification of limitarianism.² Although there is a wealth of empirical literature on the negative impacts of excessive wealth on

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- 1 One might rather attribute the irresponsibility of Couch to a parenting style of indulgence and unwillingness to impose limitations rather than wealth. This is indeed a plausible explanation of Couch's behaviour. But the paper does not purport to explain why Couch behaved as he did. It just attempts to build on the idea that wealth might undermine responsibility, which is sufficiently meaningful to have been used as a legal defence in the criminal justice system.
 - 2 Robeyns uses the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental (or non-intrinsic) rather than the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding reasons to make a similar point. Note, however, that the two distinctions do not necessarily coincide. There are instrumental and self-regarding reasons for limitarianism. For example, if material wealth is detrimental to well-being, limitarianism may have the instrumental value of increasing rich people's well-being, regardless of its positive effects on others.

well-being,³ the good this paper focuses on is not well-being. We could indeed adopt a normative political theory that acknowledges the value of both well-being and autonomy and make trade-offs if needed. Such pluralist self-regarding case for limitarianism might perhaps be stronger. However, political philosophers who are sceptical of well-being-based political morality may find it more palatable to appeal to the sole value of autonomy. They would point out that, in pluralistic societies, there are several competing conceptions of well-being. They could worry that a state that purports to promote a controversial conception of well-being might fail to demonstrate adequate respect for its citizens' own views about the good life. I shall thus solely focus on the possible benefits of limitarianism for rich people's autonomy. Even in pluralistic societies, liberal democracies have the mission to promote autonomy because it secures adequate democratic participation as well as the individual capacity to reflect on, revise or exit conceptions of well-being and the good life.

This article thus propounds and discusses arguments to support the two following theses: (1) Above a certain wealth ceiling, a person's having more material resources does not always increase her autonomy; (2) Above such wealth ceiling, material possession might even be detrimental to the development and the exercise of rich people's autonomy, or at least some rich people's autonomy. The aim of such discussion is threefold. Firstly, it purports to support the plausibility of empirical conjectures regarding the detrimental impact of excessive wealth on autonomy. The article gathers together and reinterprets different strands of empirical research in psychology and in sociology for this purpose. Then, it draws the normative implications of autonomy-based political philosophy, should these conjectures be true. The paper argues that a possible implication would be the implementation of a limitarian distribution of material resources through a 100% wealth and income tax beyond a certain wealth ceiling. Finally, bearing in mind that several liberal-minded scholars and policy-makers seem willing to grant that paternalistic measures (such as in-kind transfers) aimed at poor people are legitimate, thereby assuming they are not fully autonomous, the paper aims to restore an epistemic balance between our often critical

3 See the introduction of Section 3.

assessment of the autonomy of the poor and our obliviousness to the lack of autonomy of the rich.

The paper unfolds as follows. Section 2 expounds a multi-dimensional account of autonomy. Section 3 examines hypotheses regarding the ways excessive wealth might undermine the development and exercise of autonomy. Section 4 suggests that, if these hypotheses are true, and even if they are not true for all rich people, a limitarian distribution of wealth might be a tool to secure the rich's autonomy. It also discusses the level of wealth that should be limited. Section 5 addresses the following issue: if limiting wealth facilitates the development and exercise of autonomy, does it imply coercive measures to prevent people from becoming too rich are justified? Section 6 briefly addresses the problem of incentives.

2. A Multi-Dimensional Account of Autonomy

This section expounds an account of the conditions of autonomy, drawing on literature in political philosophy and on relational autonomy. In the philosophical literature, the word "autonomy" is sometimes used to refer to only some dimensions of autonomy.⁴ Although addressing the immense philosophical literature on autonomy is beyond the scope of this paper, a clarification of the definition, conceptions, and conditions of autonomy will be useful for its purpose. Autonomy involves multiple dimensions whose interpretations are context-dependent (Mackenzie 2014). In this paper, the account of autonomy aims to fulfil the purpose of identifying the morally desirable distribution of wealth. Autonomy will refer here both to a personal capacity and to the set of conditions that permit and facilitate the development and exercise of this capacity. These conditions may be grouped in two general dimensions of autonomy: internal and external conditions.

Internal conditions refer to the conditions of self-governing agency and involve at least three subsets of conditions. *First*, the agent must be equipped to a sufficient degree with the *mental abilities, capacities, and skills needed to select the appropriate means to achieve a goal, to plan actions and to achieve these plans*. These include, among others, the ability to find information and to check the truth or the probability of a claim, the

4 See: Dworkin (1988, 6).

ability to design a strategy, and the skills needed to overcome weakness of the will and procrastination. Since these abilities, skills, and capacities do not necessarily serve autonomously chosen goals, another subset of conditions is necessary: *authenticity conditions*. Authenticity involves being able to reflect critically upon one's first-order goals, to revise them so that they cohere with one's reflectively constituted higher-order commitments and conception of oneself, as well as to revise these commitments and conception of oneself too.⁵ Feminist critiques have pointed out that agents are unlikely to meet authenticity conditions if they are subject to oppressive socialisation and norms. The *third* subset of conditions aims thus to *enable the agent to regard herself as capable and authorised to define her commitments and act in accordance with them*. These conditions include self-trust, self-respect as well as being recognised and treated by others as an autonomous agent.⁶

For most persons, the exercise and development of a self-governing agency require favourable *external conditions*. These include *independence conditions*: interferences of others such as manipulation, indoctrination, pressures and unjustified coercion should be mitigated and eliminated if possible.⁷ External conditions also include securing adequate levels of *basic political and social liberties*.⁸ These liberties would include freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of movement, freedom of political participation. For the exercise of autonomy to be meaningful, agents must have an *adequate set of options* to choose from (Raz 1986, 372–375). An adequate set of options must include a sufficiently varied range of options to enable the agent to make important as well as more trivial choices (Raz 1986, 374–375). For an agent to be able to fully exercise her autonomy, the options offered should not be such that the agent faces a tragic dilemma. In addition, access to these options must be genuine. The agent should have been sufficiently exposed to them and should be able to give them serious consideration.

The account of autonomy provided here is a relational account in two senses. Firstly, its analysis of the factors that impede or help

5 Seminal discussions of the authenticity conditions include: Christman (1987); Dworkin (1988, 3–20); Frankfurt (1988); Friedman (1986).

6 On this dimension of autonomy, see, for example: Benson (2005); Mackenzie (2014); McLeod (2002); Westlund (2009).

7 E.g. Raz (1986, 372–373).

8 Cf. Rawls (2001, 45).

the development and exercise of autonomy emphasises the role of social relations. This is rather obvious for the third subset of internal conditions (self-respect and being treated as an autonomous agent) and for independence conditions. But favourable social and interpersonal relations are also crucial for the adequate development of mental and critical abilities. Secondly, this account considers social relations to be one (but not the only) indicator of the degree of autonomy enjoyed by agents. In other words, autonomy could be at least partly assessed by focusing on social conditions and relations, without having to look into the actual psychological state of the agent.⁹ As we shall see in the following section, the level of wealth could be one of these indicators of autonomy.

3. How Excessive Wealth Might Undermine Autonomy

The development and exercise of at least a basic degree of autonomy can be jeopardised by a distribution of wealth failing to address material poverty and inequalities. But this consideration focuses on just one facet of the relationship between autonomy and material wealth: the beneficial effects of material wealth on autonomy. If it is likely that lack of material resources damages autonomy, is it equally true that the wealthier one is, the more autonomous? Shouldn't we also investigate the potential detrimental effects of money on autonomy? To address this question, this section suggests and expounds five mechanisms which suggest that, first, above a certain wealth ceiling, a person's having more material resources does not always increase her autonomy and, second, material possession might even be detrimental to the development and the exercise of rich people's autonomy, or at least of some rich people.

The identification of these mechanisms appeals to the analysis of autonomy itself, but also to empirical conjectures. Since this investigation is undertaken from a philosophical armchair, I must lay out the status of such conjectures within the normative reflection pursued here. For this purpose, it is helpful to scrutinise the status of the opposite conjecture, that is, the conjecture that having more wealth (or having a lot of it) is always, or generally, beneficial to the development and exercise of autonomy. Consider the following quote from Rawls's *Theory of Justice* as a way of illustration:

9 For a defence of this approach to relational autonomy, see Oshana (2006, 49–74).

“[primary goods] are things which it is supposed a rational man wants whatever else he wants. Regardless of what an individual’s rational plans are in detail, it is assumed that there are various things which he would prefer more of rather than less. With more of these goods, men can generally be assured of greater success in carrying out their intentions and in advancing their ends, whatever these ends may be. The primary social goods, to give them in broad categories, are rights, liberties, and opportunities, and income and wealth.” (Rawls 1999, 79)

According to Rawls, a rational human being should prefer more money and material resources than less. Rawls does not appeal to empirical evidence to sustain this claim. As he makes it clear in the Preface to the 1999 edition of his *Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1999, Xiii), this claim is not to be understood as a descriptive claim stating a fact about actual human psychology. The “rational man” does not refer to observable individuals. It refers to a conception of the person that embodies certain political ideal democratic societies endorse, the ideal of free and equal persons. These persons are *to be regarded as* having an interest in developing and exercising their autonomy, or, in Rawls’s terms, their two moral powers, which include rational capacities. The purpose of this conception of the person is not to describe real-world individuals but to derive, justify and systematise principles of justice and the demands these place on institutions. If from the perspective of Rawlsian rational and reasonable persons, it is always better to have more material resources than less, then the only legitimate reason to limit people’s share of resources is the fact that these resources are scarce and subject to competing claims.

These assertions can be challenged. There are reasons not to move too quickly from the claim that free and equal persons have an interest in developing and exercising their autonomy to the claim that free and equal persons should (as a matter of conceptual necessity) prefer having more than less material resources, and from that to the claim that there are no reasons other than scarcity to limit people’s fair share. The analysis of autonomy does not necessarily lead to the implication that more wealth equates to a higher degree of autonomy. Furthermore, some empirical conjectures suggest excessive wealth might be damaging to autonomy in a number of ways.

The following subsections expound and discuss five “mechanisms” through which excessive material wealth might fail to contribute to the development and exercise of autonomy and even undermine it. These

mechanisms are to some extent conjectural because the empirical literature on the negative effects of wealth tends to couch these effects in terms other than the conceptions of autonomy prevailing in the philosophical literature. Several studies have investigated relationships between wealth and happiness (e.g. Blanchflower and Oswald 2004; Brickman et al. 1978; Csikszentmihalyi 1999; Cummins 2000; Diener et al. 1985; Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002; Diener and Oishi 2000; Easterlin 1973, 1995, 2001; Frey and Stutzer 2002; Myers 2000).¹⁰ But happiness is not autonomy. A happy person can be heteronomous and an autonomous person can be unhappy. With these limitations regarding existing the effects of wealth on autonomy in mind, let us look at the five hypothetical mechanisms through which wealth might undermine autonomy.

3.1. Extreme Wealth Might Hinder the Development of Deliberative Capacities

The first mechanism can be summarised as follows: lack of material constraints might hinder the development of deliberative capacities, which is a condition for the exercise of autonomy. The argument in support of this first mechanism draws on the “ecological” account of rational practical deliberation (Morton, 2011). According to the ecological account, the guiding norms of practical deliberation respond to the interactions between the psychological capacities of the agent and her environment.¹¹ The agent’s environment includes, among other features, material constraints and availability of resources. This means that scarcity, as well as an abundance of material resources, affect the guiding norms of individual practical deliberation. Hume’s discussion of the circumstances of justice provides interesting insights into the effects of wealth on deliberative capacities (Hume 1751 sect III, part I). Hume discusses the scenario of abundance. In such a scenario, justice would be a useless norm, because agents cannot fail to meet its demands. But justice is not the only norm that affects practical deliberation. These reflections on justice can be extended to other areas

10 For an overview of the empirical literature on the relationship between income and happiness, see: Angelescu (2014).

11 Morton’s (2011) main concern is the justification of the norms of practical deliberation, but she provides useful insights on the effects of the environment on deliberative capacities.

of practical deliberation (Morton 2011, 568). For example, a guiding norm like long-term planning is unnecessary to an agent who has access to abundant material resources, since this agent cannot fail to acquire such resources for lack of planning (Morton 2011, 570). It seems plausible that successful long-term planning and other deliberative capacities involved in the acquisition of scarce resources require training. Therefore, a state of abundance might sometimes contribute to hinder the formation of deliberative capacities, which constitute one of the dimensions of autonomy. Of course, insofar as non-material resources such as time remain scarce, rich agents still need to deliberate about what ends to pursue with the limited time allotted to them. But they do not have to produce an additional reflection on the wisest use of material resources. In other words, moderate material constraints¹² might contribute to the development of deliberative capacities. This mechanism could be the rationale underlying the affluenza defence I mentioned in the introduction in this way (Dart 2014; Eckenroth 2015, 456–457). The affluenza defence suggests that some extremely wealthy agents cannot be held fully responsible for their actions because their wealth has prevented them from forming the deliberative capacities one needs to be appropriately considered an autonomous and responsible agent.

3.2. Extreme Wealth Might Be Conducive to Problematic Adaptive Preferences Formation

One could object to the first mechanism that many rich people seem to have excellent deliberative capacities. For example, Warren Buffett is famous for his wise investment decisions. In addition, insofar as deliberative capacities develop during childhood and young adulthood, the mechanism described above suggests wealth hinders autonomy only at earlier life stages.¹³ But there is a *second mechanism* through which wealth might undermine autonomy. This second mechanism can be summarised as follows: *excessive wealth, as well as excessive poverty, may induce the formation of problematic, autonomy-deficient, adaptive preferences.*

12 Excessive scarcity of resources might also hinder the development of deliberative capacities, for example by inducing decision fatigue (e.g. Spears, 2014).

13 I thank Carl Knight for having pointed out this to me.

In political and social philosophy, adaptive preferences are most often discussed in relation to material poverty and deprivation (e.g. Nussbaum 2000; Sen 1985). Scholars point out that the content of preferences adjusts to conditions of material deprivation and oppression. They argue that preferences formed in response to such conditions should not be considered reliable and authoritative judgment about the agent's well-being. The questionable status of adaptive preferences is the basis for a critique of subjective welfarism, which assumes that preference satisfaction equates with well-being.

There are several accounts of adaptive preferences (e.g. Khader 2011). Some accounts consider adaptive preferences problematic *because they are contrary to well-being*. Such accounts endorse an objective theory of well-being. They stipulate that adaptive preferences should not be considered authoritative judgments about well-being because of their *content*. This implies the satisfaction of adaptive preferences does not make the agent objectively better off (although it may make her *subjectively* better off). Conditions of deprivation induce agents to downgrade their expectations, to the point that the content of their preferences becomes contrary to their objective well-being. A predictable objection to this account is that it risks failing to respect value pluralism and justifying inappropriate paternalism. But since this article is not concerned with well-being but with autonomy, I move on to discuss accounts that consider adaptive preferences problematic *because their formation involves a deficit of autonomy*. These accounts stipulate that adaptive preferences are problematic not because of their content, but because the *history* of their formation involves a *deficit in autonomy*. For instance, adaptive preferences occur when a change in the set of options induces the agent to unconsciously reverse her preference ordering (Elster 1982). Preference change does not result from deliberate and intentional revision of the agent's desires, but from a drive, a psychological mechanism of which the agent is not fully aware. What is at stake here is authenticity: preference adaptation is deficient in autonomy when preference reversal does not follow from a conscious revision of higher-order commitments and conceptions of oneself.¹⁴

14 Serene J. Khader (2011, 87–88) criticises this account of adaptive preference on two grounds. First, she points out that the only way for practitioners and policy makers to know whether other people's preference are deficient in autonomy is to look at the content of preferences (since they cannot "read other people's minds"). She

What is interesting is that, although it is commonplace in the adaptive preferences literature, the connection between material poverty and adaptive preferences is contingent (in objective good accounts as well as in autonomy-based ones). Other kinds of circumstances may facilitate adaptive preferences formation. I would like to submit that extreme wealth can also be conducive to problematic preference adaptation. How could that be possible? We can observe that people adapt to affluence, that is, to the standards of living associated with high incomes. Rich people are lastingly or permanently exposed to affluence. The preferences of people who are lastingly or permanently exposed to affluence are formed in response to such exposure to wealthy lifestyles. Now, such adjustment is not sufficient to diagnose adaptive preferences, since non-autonomous adaptive preferences must also involve a complete reversal of preference orderings (Elster 1982, 229). Yet it might be the case that exposure to affluence provokes such reversal. For example, rich people, who are lastingly exposed to affluence, might be induced to evaluate and rank certain lifestyles differently from the way they would have evaluated them had they not been exposed to affluence. They might be led to downgrading options they would have otherwise positively appreciated without having reflected on their reasons for downgrading such options.

The idea that the rich suffer from adaptive preferences may seem counterintuitive. The rich seem to have access to more options than the non-rich. If so, isn't she more autonomous? In the two following

thus suggests that they "are surreptitiously using a theory of the good rather than procedural autonomy to distinguish" adaptive preferences. But this is a practical problem rather than a fundamental issue. The fact that it is difficult to identify a phenomenon does not mean we must change the definition of this phenomenon. Adaptive preferences as autonomy deficits may be a meaningful concept and describe a real and socially relevant phenomenon without being easy to diagnose. This critique is thus not fatal to autonomy-based accounts of adaptive preferences. Second, Khader worries that this definition classes too many preferences as adaptive. Akratic preferences and (unconscious) correction of expensive tastes would count as adaptive. The problem is that she does not precisely explain why it is problematic to count such preferences as adaptive. She seems to suggest that we should not see such preferences as "worthy of public suspicion". Indeed, if we thought adaptive preferences always required coercive public interventions aiming to actively prevent agents from satisfying their preferences, it would be dangerous to treat too many preferences as adaptive. But the adaptive preference literature does not have to draw such extreme implications from its definition of adaptive preferences. It may just recommend setting social conditions conducive to autonomous preference formation.

subsections, I shall explain why it might be the case that the rich have actually fewer options than the non-rich, despite their purchasing power.

3.3. Extreme Wealth Might Erode Our Capacity to Revise Our Conception of the Good Because it Habituates Us to Expensive Lifestyles

Even if exposure to a great number of options favoured autonomy, there are reasons to believe the rich do not have access to more options than other people. It is now time to challenge the idea that the rich have access to more options than the non-rich. Of course, many options cost money. At a first glance, it thus seems the rich must have access to more options than the non-rich: they have access to both expensive and inexpensive options, whilst the non-rich only have access to inexpensive options. But this reasoning does not take into account psychological obstacles to the enjoyment of certain options. A psychological mechanism, which constitutes the *third mechanism* through which wealth might undermine autonomy, *may hinder wealthy people's access to some of the options theoretically available to them through habituation to comfort and expensive lifestyle*. As we have already noted, wealthy people are regularly exposed to and get used to lifestyles that are inaccessible to most people. With some exceptions, most wealthy people habituate to expensive lifestyles and a high level of comfort. They are more likely to develop expensive preferences and habits. By saying that a person has expensive preferences, I mean that she needs a comparatively high level of material resources and money to reach a given level of satisfaction. When most human beings might be sufficiently satisfied with a yearly net income of, say, 20 000 €, the person who has expensive preferences might need thirty times as much to reach *the same* level of satisfaction.

Insofar as she is habituated to affluent lifestyles, the rich are much more likely to need more material resources than the non-rich to reach the same satisfaction level. We can intuitively grasp how easier—psychologically speaking - it is to switch from a frugal lifestyle to a costly one than the opposite. For example, it seems most people do not have issues with transitioning from the standard of living that is typical of students to the one full time paid workers can afford (although they might miss other aspects of student life, such as having a lot of time devoted to learning things for their own sake). By contrast, the decrease

in income caused by events such as divorce or the loss of a job seems to cause major decreases in well-being (although income is certainly not the only factor in those examples, it has its importance). Some empirical research provides indirect support to the hypothesis that the more wealthy people are, the more money they are likely to need to reach a given level of well-being. For example, Frey and Stutzer show that the rich's appreciation of a "sufficient income" is higher than the non-rich's (Frey and Stutzer 2002).

Expensive preferences do not only result from the fact that one becomes accustomed to a high level of comfort and luxury. They also result from prevailing consumption norms in one's social group of reference. Robert Frank illustrates this phenomenon with the following example: suppose a person wants to replace her old 90\$ outdoor grill. Nowadays, most people in her social group buy upmarket grills, which may cost up to 5000\$. This person starts wondering whether she should not replace her 90\$ grill with at least a 1000\$ model. The fact that other people in the social circle of this person spend so much money on luxury grills changes the conventional definition of what an acceptable grill is in a given social group (Frank 1999, 10–11). Since rich people tend to frequent other rich people, it becomes inconceivable for them not to follow expensive consumption patterns.

To summarise, wealthy people are more likely to develop expensive preferences because they get used to luxuries available to them and because their consumption patterns tend to replicate those of other rich people. We can thus argue that expensive preferences impede autonomy because they increase the psychological costs of revising one's conception of the good life. The argument is the following: a person who is rich becomes habituated to the standard of living associated with wealth. She thus develops expensive preferences and habits. Since expensive preferences render us less capable of being satisfied with little material resources, it is more difficult to transition from expensive preferences to non-expensive ones than the reverse. Now, each possible conception of the good life is only compatible with a limited set of standards of living. For example, many interesting careers are not likely to make someone very rich: farmer, teacher, artist, nurse, priest, police officer, baker, carpenter, musician or reporter, to name only a few. Choosing or transitioning to such careers is likely to be psychologically difficult for someone who has expensive preferences. Such psychological costs and

obstacles can thus prevent an agent from considering many potentially worthwhile lifeplans. In that sense, expensive preferences created by wealth erode our capacity to revise our life plans and to act upon our authentic judgments. Less comfortable options are theoretically available to the rich, but in practice, they are rarely seriously considered. Since being able to revise our lifeplans and to act upon our authentic judgments is a crucial dimension of autonomy, extreme wealth may, through the mechanism I have just described, erode autonomy.

3.4. Extreme Wealth Might Erode Our Capacity to Revise Our Conception of the Good Because it Could Trigger a Fear of a Drop in Status

Another psychological obstacle that might render some options unavailable to extremely wealthy people is related to over-attachment to social status. The key idea of this fourth mechanism is that *being wealthy induces a fear of a drop in status, which undermines authenticity and restricts the range of options the agent has genuine access to*. The identification of the mechanism starts with the observation that we, human beings, have a tendency to desire to keep up with the people who have the same social status as us (or a slightly higher social status). Social status is generally related to wealth. If we want to keep up with those who have a given social status, we are likely to want to keep up with those who have a certain level of income. The higher our income and wealth are, the higher the social status we want to keep up with. Empirical evidence shows that an increase in income leads to an increase in social aspirations (Diener 2000). The problem is that, if wealthy people want to keep up with a high social status, their life choices have to align with this goal. Their choices must not conflict with the need to keep up with other rich people. Therefore, in order to retain their social status, they will be prompted to eliminate certain possibly valuable options from their options set, including choices of career and marriage partners. This means that the only options most agents seriously consider are the options that involve them being at least as wealthy as they currently are (or as wealthy as their parents currently are). Although rich people can conceivably flourish with less money and status than they currently have, their significant life choices (including career choices and the choice of

a partner) are likely to be driven by a “fear of a drop in status”.¹⁵ They do not worry about not having enough material resources to pursue the conception of the good they genuinely value (this worry is perfectly compatible with the exercise of autonomy). They worry about keeping their status, and this prevents them from giving serious and genuine consideration to alternative palatable career or marriage options. If we frame the problem in terms of adequacy of options, this means the higher one’s wealth-related social status is, the fewer options one has, since there are only a few social positions that still deserve consideration, given the fear of dropping. The higher one’s wealth-related social status is, the less scope one has to revise one’s goals so that they cohere with one’s authentic self.

This mechanism belongs to a class of mechanisms through which having more choices may actually make people less free, due to the expectations and pressures from others that accompany these new choices. Gerald Dworkin gives the example of the choice of determining the sex of one’s children. He suggests having this choice may not make future parents freer, because of “the social pressures that are likely to be exerted on parents to produce one sex rather than another (the grandparents who always wanted a little girl or the community that needs more soldiers)” (Dworkin 1988, 68). On the one hand, parents have more freedom of choice. On the other hand, they have less autonomy since this new choice provides others with a reason to put them under pressure (a violation of the independence condition of autonomy) and may threaten their capacity to live in accordance with the values they cherish the most (a violation of the authenticity condition). Analogously, when we mitigate the pressure to conform, the rich seem to have more options with respect to career choices than the poor. But once we take into account such pressure, it might be that careers such as electrician, baker, nurse or primary school teacher are in fact inaccessible to the rich.

At this point, the reader might wonder why the choice to keep up with a high social status should be considered less autonomous than the choice to pursue a career or to marry a partner that does not fit well with

15 I borrow the term from Maurin (2009), although Maurin uses it in a different way and addresses a different issue, that is, the social and economic consequences of the fear of a drop in status of middle class graduates who have a stable job.

the expectations associated to a high social status. The reader might think rich people can deliberate carefully about options involving a drop in status and consciously settle upon prestigious career and marriage choices. Insofar as a choice is autonomous in virtue of its history rather than in virtue of its content, the choice to keep up with a high status can conceivably be considered as autonomous. However, sociological studies suggest that the education and socialisation of the progeny of rich people are designed in such a way as to ensure rich families will retain their status across generations (e.g. Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2009, 101–111). Spatial segregation and endogamy act as safeguards against individual choices that could threaten the sheer existence and interests of the very rich (Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot 2009, 52–68). To describe the phenomenon in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, rich people are characterised by a *habitus*, that is, a set of stable dispositions, which includes beliefs, desires, values, and behavioural patterns. *Habitus* is the embodiment of the fact that one belongs to a given social class (Bourdieu 1979, 112–113; 1984 133–136). Such *habitus* is not freely and deliberately acquired. *Habitus* is acquired through class socialisation and conditioning. *Habitus* contributes itself to the reproduction of the conditions of class socialisation. Rich bourgeois people and working-class people each have their own *habitus*. *Habitus* involves a hierarchical classification of lifestyles: the *habitus* of the rich is ranked higher than the *habitus* of the poor (for example, their artistic tastes will be deemed more refined than those of working-class people). Such unchosen classification turns into a virtue in the fierce competition for wealth and power by inducing agents to select options that fit well with their social group (Bourdieu 1979, 195). Therefore, study and career paths, spatial segregation, endogamy, consumption habits, and aesthetic tastes are part of the strategies the rich use to retain their social position and ensure social reproduction over time. Such strategies are all the more effective as they are unconsciously pursued (Bourdieu 1979, 285).¹⁶ If a person becomes fully aware that she marries another person in order to retain her social status, and not because she is genuinely in love with her partner, she will probably start wondering whether she should not

16 To my knowledge, Bourdieu (1984, 44–45) did not defend a limitarian tax as a way to render people more autonomous. He suggested we could increase our autonomy by increasing our sociological knowledge, and in particular by becoming aware of our *habitus*.

consider other marriage options, whether such options are not valuable too, whether the goal she pursues by marrying a rich partner is genuinely her own, and so on. The rich, whose interests qua members of the social group or class of rich people, are the most likely to be threatened by a change of social status involved by an atypical marital or career choice (since there are fewer social status options enabling them to keep up with their current social position). Although the fear of a drop in status is present in every social group (except the lowest ones, who do not have anything to lose), it is likely to be stronger in the upper layers of society. Therefore, other things being equal, and insofar as a fear of a drop in status hampers the capacity to elaborate and revise an autonomous conception of the good life, the rich might be less autonomous than other social groups.

The idea that psychological obstacles (broadly understood) can restrict the number of options available to the agent may raise the following worry: having strong commitments, such as religious or ethical commitments, seems also to lead the agent to disregard a range of potentially valuable options.¹⁷ But the line of reasoning developed above does not imply autonomy-based normative theories should be wary of strong commitments (this would be odd). From an autonomy-based perspective, the crucial problem with the third and the fourth mechanism is not the mere fact that wealth limits the rich's option. The crucial problem pertains to the process through which the rich, or some rich, are induced to fail to consider a range of options. This process has nothing to do with rational deliberation and genuine commitments. It is triggered by unthinking dispositions such as habituation, fear and social habitus. Likewise, the sheer fact that agents cease to consider a range of options other might deem valuable as a result of their religious or ethical commitments is not problematic from an autonomy-based perspective. It would be problematic only if these agents came to embrace such commitments in the wrong kind of way, for instance as a result of anxiety.¹⁸

17 I thank an anonymous reviewer for having raised this important issue.

18 These commitments need not be acquired in an autonomous way. Most of our commitments are not: we tend to adopt the religions, ethical and political views that are endorsed by the people around us. But this need not be a problem as long as education also equips us with the capacities needed to revise these commitments and come to embrace them in the right kind of way.

3.5. Extreme Wealth Might be Incompatible with Transparency with One's Own Values

The fifth mechanism can be summarised as follows: insofar as, in a world of finite resources, an extremely wealthy lifestyle is incompatible with social and environmental justice, and insofar as we, humans, tend to shun the belief that our own behaviours and values are harmful to others, extreme wealth is not conducive to transparency with one's reasons for action, which is a condition of autonomy. This last mechanism is related to the logic exhibited by Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1962). In a nutshell, cognitive dissonance refers both to the inconsistencies between one's beliefs, or between one's values and one's actions, and to the discomfort these inconsistencies generate. Evidence shows humans shun such inconsistencies. We are motivated to resolve them, either by revising our beliefs or by changing our behaviours. Recently, research on cognitive dissonance has focused on the hypothesis that the main motivation for overcoming dissonance is to sustain the belief that one is a good person (Monin 2008). Cognitive dissonance theory may explain why, in consumerist societies, there is a general tendency to ignore or minimise information about environmental problems requiring major consumption behaviour changes (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002, 254). When we face a conflict between our ethical values (environmental preservation or social justice) and our desires (living a comfortable and luxurious life), we unconsciously solve the inconsistency by selectively perceiving the information that confirms the path of behaviour we want to adopt, or ignoring or minimising the information that contradicts it.

As to the rich, their path of behaviour and even the sheer existence of extremely wealthy people are likely to be inconsistent with a wide range of conceptions of social as well as environmental justice. In a world of finite resources, the appropriation of a significant quantity of resources by a small minority of people will threaten the access of other people to their fair share and even their capacity to meet their basic needs. Wealthy people do not only save and consume resources over which others may have legitimate claims, they also tend to adopt practices inconsistent with the stability of just institutions, such as fiscal evasion and political pressure to reduce taxation on income and wealth. Furthermore, luxury consumption habits such as frequent travelling

are probably not compatible with the long-term preservation of the capacity of ecosystems to meet human needs. Some would probably object that rich people also invest their capital, that such investments are required to improve the fate of less advantaged social groups (through job creation, for instance) and that rich people need to be incentivised to make such contribution to the social product. If this logic is true, the fact that some people are extremely wealthy is not incompatible with social justice. Yet there are a couple of reasons to doubt the validity of such logic. First, recent economic history suggests that, although some inequalities might be needed to incentivise people to invest their financial as well as their human capital, those inequalities need not be as extreme as they currently are: economic history suggests top income shares were substantially lower in the postwar decades than they are now (e.g. Atkinson et al. 2011). The point here is not to argue for a specific conception of social justice, but to suggest that a broad range of widespread and plausible conceptions of social justice is unlikely to deem the existence of extremely rich people acceptable. If this is the case, the extremely rich person who, like most of us, wants to sustain the belief that she is a good person might face an inconsistency between her path of behaviour and plausible conceptions of social justice. In order to avoid cognitive dissonance and solve this inconsistency, she could either change her behaviour, give away her money (but this is unlikely to happen), or change her beliefs about social justice (this is more likely to happen). She might thus be induced to ignore, minimise or reinterpret true information on the harmful impacts of her behaviours and actions. She might assess conceptions of social justice as well as empirical research in economics and social sciences not on the basis of their true merits, but on the basis of their consistency with the existence of her social class. She might also come to believe that cynicism is *de bon ton*. She might wholeheartedly embrace the belief that wealth has beneficial trickle-down effects on the poor, or that charity is more efficient than tax and transfers, not because these beliefs are valid (although they might be so), but because they are consistent with her sustaining her path of behaviour, values, and lifestyle.

Cognitive dissonance is bad for autonomy because autonomy involves transparency with one's own values and reasons for actions. One way of regaining autonomy is to minimise the importance of sustaining a given path of behaviour or to revise our desires so that satisfying them

does not contradict our values. Insofar as wealthy people tend to have a wealthy lifestyle, and people who have a wealthy lifestyle tend to want to sustain it, they are likely to be less transparent with their values and reasons for beliefs and actions, and thus less autonomous.

4. Autonomy-Based Limitarian Distributive Justice

The preceding section has expounded five mechanisms which suggest that, above a certain wealth ceiling, a person's having more material resources does not always increase her autonomy, and might even be detrimental to it, at least for some rich people. Let us move slightly further and examine the normative implications of autonomy-based political philosophy if the negative impacts of wealth on autonomy prove to be true. One way to address these negative impacts consists in preventing people from having too much in order to protect their autonomy. Distributive policies, through which a specific allocation of material wealth and resources is achieved, are a possible tool for this purpose. If wealth undermines the development and exercise of autonomy in several ways, preventing the effects of excessive wealth on autonomy will provide a reason—albeit not a decisive one - to justify a limitarian distribution. In a limitarian distribution, citizens would be prevented to acquire or receive too much material resources in order to protect their autonomy.¹⁹ Such limitarian distribution could be achieved by a “limitarian tax”, that is, a 100% wealth and income tax above a certain wealth ceiling.

4.1. Restoring the Liberal Paternalist Balance Between the Rich and the Poor

At this point, the reader is likely to worry that we are deriving too rapidly a controversial normative proposal from empirical conjectures. Political philosophers and policy-makers cannot read in rich people's mind to determine with certainty whether they are really autonomous or not, and might thus unjustifiably treat them as non-autonomous. But when we shift our attention from the rich to the poor, however, it appears that

¹⁹ Let us remark that autonomy-based limitarianism is a partial theory of justice and does not preclude the normative relevance of other demands of justice.

some liberal philosophers, economists, and policy-makers seem willing to endorse policies and practices that presuppose that some categories of (non-rich) citizens need some help in order to exercise and develop their autonomy. Examples of such policies include the public provision of goods and services in kind rather than in cash.²⁰ Few liberal-minded philosophers, economists, policy-makers or citizens advocate replacing the public provision of education or health with their equivalent in cash.²¹ Although the public provision of some collective goods may be justified on efficiency grounds,²² in-kind provision of goods such as housing or food subsidies seems to a large extent motivated by paternalistic concerns (e.g. Musgrave 1959; Thurow 1976; Currie and Gahvari 2008). As Thurow puts it:

“ [...] Obviously it is a difficult problem to establish any individual’s degree of incompetence, but the existence of incompetence is a problem that neither governments nor economists can ignore. [...] in-kind aid can be used to influence individuals to make those decisions that society thinks they would be making if they fell into those classes with absolute consumer sovereignty” (Thurow 1976, 372–373)

Consumer sovereignty refers here to autonomy. Now, although in-kind aid presupposes that some individuals are not sufficiently autonomous, it does not presuppose that all beneficiaries are not autonomous. It suffices that only some of them are to justify mildly paternalistic policies. Hence several liberal-minded thinkers find acceptable to treat autonomous citizens as non-autonomous agents in order to make sure they less autonomous fellow citizens do not jeopardise their future well-being and autonomy. What is striking, however, is that we seldom consider applying the same line of thought to rich people.²³

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- 20 I deliberately do not mention compulsory education, because, in our societies, we consider treating children as non-autonomous agents more legitimate than treating adults as non-autonomous agents. Discussing whether and under which conditions it is justifiable to treat children as non-autonomous agents is beyond the scope of this paper.
- 21 There are exceptions, of course, such as Stuart White’s (2010) proposal to replace higher education subsidies with a basic capital.
- 22 For some goods such as education, it may help mitigating coordination costs and better address asymmetry of information between providers and users. For instance, see Colin Crouch’s (2003) discussion of the problems created by market provision of education.
- 23 The disproportionate attention political philosophy, economics and public administration place on the poor’s alleged lack of autonomy (compared to the

If we believe that mildly paternalistic policies (such as in-kind provision) aimed at the poor are justifiable in a liberal democracy, despite the fact that some members of the target group are sufficiently autonomous, we should be willing to consider mildly paternalistic policies aimed at the rich. Of course, a seemingly genuine liberal alternative is to have no paternalistic policies at all, be it for the rich or for the poor. The problem is that, although such policy succeeds in treating people as if they were sufficiently autonomous, it may fail at securing real autonomy in the long run: the capacity for autonomy comes into degrees and continues developing throughout human life.

These considerations speak in favour of not just a limitarian distribution of wealth, but in favour of a distributive pattern combining limitarianism and sufficientarianism. Sufficientarianism contributes to secure autonomy for several reasons. Material poverty and important economic inequalities hamper independence, liberty, and access to an adequate set of options. Poverty and inequalities jeopardise a person's bargaining power and make her subject to the will of others. Moreover, when extremely wealthy citizens have a decisive influence on the outcome of supposedly democratic processes, the "fair value" of political liberties is not guaranteed anymore (Rawls 2001, 148–150). The parallel between poverty and wealth suggests a coherent limitarian theory of justice is likely to endorse sufficientarianism as well.

rich) seems to amount to a systematic epistemic injustice of the testimonial sort. Testimonial injustices occur when an agent does not receive the right amount of credibility from an observer (or hearer) owing to prejudice on the observer's part (Fricker 2007, 17). The right amount of credibility is the amount that matches the truth (Fricker 2007, 18). Testimonial injustice is systematic when it is connected with other types of injustices, such as distributive injustices (Fricker 2007, 27). Because not all poor people are non-autonomous, the poor who are falsely treated as incompletely autonomous receive an unfair deficit of credibility and are thus victims of testimonial injustices. Because not all rich people are fully autonomous, the rich who are falsely treated as fully autonomous receive an unfair excess of credibility and are thus also victims of testimonial injustices. According to Fricker, most epistemic injustices consist of credibility deficits. Credibility excess, however, constitutes an epistemic injustice when it is cumulative, that is, when a person's capacity as a knower has been undermined, malformed and insulted by repeated excessive attributions of credibility. She illustrates this possibility by the case of a member of the ruling elite who would have since childhood been repeatedly "epistemically puffed up" by others. The development of this person's capacity as a knower would thus have been seriously hampered. He would have been made a fool of (Fricker 2007, 18).

4.2. How Much Is Too Much?

Readers may wonder how much is too much. Giving a number is difficult because the impact of material wealth on an individual's autonomy depends on a variety of factors, including economic conditions such as inflation and current standards of living. In addition, the capability approach has taught theorists of distributive justice that differently abled people need different amounts of resources to achieve the same standard of living (e.g. Robeyns 2011). Thus, the wealth ceiling for a person with a long-lasting health condition to be able to develop and exercise her autonomy must be higher than for healthy individuals. However, it is important to offer ways to identify the level of wealth that should be limited to provide guidance as well as to enable us to test our intuitions.²⁴

If the mechanisms described in the preceding section prove to be true, they will provide some guidance to establish the appropriate wealth ceiling. The first mechanism suggests a person owns too much once she need not taking into account material constraints in her practical deliberation anymore. The problem is that the extent to which one has to take such constraints into account does not just depend on one's level of wealth. It also depends on the financial costs of one's ambition, on the availability of publicly funded provision of goods and services (if a person's ambitions include attending university, this presumably will be less costly in countries that provide state-funded higher education), as well as on her own perception of how rich she is. After all, Walt Disney's multimillionaire duck, Uncle Scrooge, remains overly preoccupied with material constraints. Perhaps the best rule of thumb would be to make a survey and ask people how much one must possess to be financially comfortable.

The second mechanism, the adaptive preferences mechanism, provides more straightforward guidance when it is combined with the third and the fourth one. The third mechanism suggests that a person is too rich when her wealth is such that she becomes accustomed to a level of comfort and luxury it would be difficult to renounce. This suggests the wealth ceiling must be quite low since the average, middle-class

²⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for having pressed this point.

standard of living in Western countries is likely to be difficult to abandon for the average level of comfort in other parts of the world. Hence the wealth ceiling might be barely higher than the basic “poverty” threshold of material resources a person needs to develop and exercise a sufficient level of autonomy (note that such threshold would presumably be much higher than the poverty line put forward by the World Bank).

The fourth mechanism is triggered by inequalities of social status, which are related to inequalities of wealth and income. This means that, in order to prevent this, society should attempt to move closer to equality of social status. As a result, the wealth ceiling should be such that the gap between this ceiling and the autonomy-based poverty threshold does not lead to a significant inequality of social status. A complication is that inequality of social status is not only due to inequality of material income and capital but also to inequalities of social and cultural capital.

The fifth mechanism suggests that the limitarian distribution of wealth must attempt to prevent cognitive dissonance. Here, cognitive dissonance is involved when there are conflicts between a person’s willingness to keep her share of material resources and her ability to assess different normative and empirical views of distributive justice on the basis of their true merits (rather than on their tolerance for this person’s preference for keeping what she has). This suggests that the wealth ceiling should adjust so as to prevent the rich from getting more than their fair share. However, an important clarification is needed here. It is not exactly the conflict between a person’s preference for keeping her money and a view of distributive justice *philosophers and economists could deem valid* that triggers cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is more likely to be triggered by the possible conflict between a person’s preference for keeping her money and *widespread* views of distributive justice among laypersons since such views are more readily available. Therefore, the autonomy-based wealth ceiling should be close to people’s beliefs about how much is too much.

The result of this brief discussion seems to be twofold. *First*, the wealth ceiling is likely to be close to what laypersons think the wealth ceiling should be. One way of knowing that is to conduct a survey on people’s beliefs about the wealth ceiling. This task has recently been undertaken by Ingrid Robeyns (Robeyns 2018). Another way is to take inspiration from existing political campaigns and proposals, which attempt to echo electors’ intuitions about the issue. In 2013, a Swiss

popular initiative labelled “1:12” proposed a law that would have prohibited firms from offering salaries more than twelve times higher than the lowest salary (the initiative was ultimately rejected). In 2017, French presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon proposed a 100% tax on yearly incomes above €400 000 (about \$460 000).²⁵ However, if we wish to use the €400 000 income ceiling as a rule of thumb, we should bear in mind that further adjustments would be needed to take into account inflation, purchasing power parity, international differences in standards of living, provision of public goods and services as well as interindividual inequalities of capabilities. Thus, the wealth ceiling for disabled persons or for those who live in expensive cities like New York, London or Paris might be higher—but this would also depend on the availability of public goods such as healthcare facilities or affordable and efficient public transportation. *Second*, the gap between the autonomy-based wealth ceiling and the (probably high) autonomy-based sufficiency threshold is likely to be narrow. This is not because inequality is considered bad in itself: this paper derives limitarianism from the value of autonomy, not from the value of equality. This is because the amount of material wealth everyone has access to should be sufficiently high to secure independence, adequate options as well as the proper development and exercise of mental and critical abilities, but also sufficiently low to prevent habituation to a high level of comfort and luxury, fear of a drop in status and cognitive dissonance. From this perspective, the €400 000 wealth ceiling might be already too high.²⁶ The wealth ceiling might thus be situated somewhere between €400 000 and the amount of money each individual would possess in a strictly resource egalitarian society, and this ceiling would be adjusted for purchasing power and capability parity.

5. *Autonomy-Based Limitarianism and Legitimate Coercion*

Thus far, the article has suggested empirical hypotheses in support of the theses that, above a certain wealth ceiling, a person’s having more

25 Note that limitarianism would require this income tax to be combined with a wealth tax.

26 I thank an anonymous reviewer for having pointed this to me.

material resources does not always increase her autonomy and might even be detrimental to it. Then, it has argued that, if these theses prove to be true, a possible normative implication would be the implementation of a limitarian distribution of wealth beyond a certain ceiling. Achieving a given distribution of wealth requires unpopular measures such as taxation. To secure a limitarian distribution of wealth, a 100% tax rate on wealth and income above a determinate threshold might be needed. However, such a proposal raises a puzzling issue. On one hand, taxes seem to involve the use of the state's coercive power to protect people's autonomy. On the other hand, coercion is damaging to autonomy. Are taxes aiming at promoting the autonomy of the taxpayer necessarily problematic from a liberal perspective? To address this question, I shall draw from Joseph Raz's seminal analysis of the relationship between coercion and autonomy.

Raz warns us that coercion as a method of encouraging people to act for their own good is suspect: "we are all too familiar with the danger of exaggerating the degree to which people's well-being can be promoted in flat contradiction to their formed judgments and preferences" (Raz 1986, 151). Yet he affirms liberals should not exaggerate the evils of coercion. Coercion may legitimately be used "to secure natural and social conditions which enable individuals to develop an autonomous life" (Raz 1986, 156). Coercion is a notion that involves both descriptive and evaluative dimensions (Raz 1986, 148–157). Descriptively, coercion occurs when the coercive agent threatens the coerced agent to make her worse off if she does an action A the coercive agent wants to prevent her from doing, and when the threat is effective (the belief the threat will materialise is part of the reasons for the coerced agent not to do A). There are also two evaluative dimensions of coercion: a threat is a coercive one if (i) it invades the coerced agent's autonomy and (ii) the fact that someone acted under coercion counts as a justification or a complete excuse for her action (Raz 1986, 150).

One might wonder whether a tax is really coercive. In *The Morality of Freedom*, Raz suggests that taxes, as well as subsidies, are noncoercive means the state can legitimately use to promote certain ideals (e.g. Raz 1986, 416). Taxation does not involve an overt threat. If this is correct, then we must not worry about the illegitimate use of the coercive power of the state to secure a limitarian distribution through taxation. However, taxation is not as inoffensive as it seems to be. It is coercive in the sense

that it manipulates the choice menu and the costs and payoffs associated with each option (Waldron 1988, 1142). This means taxpayers' decision to save, give or earn money is altered by the fact that the state's action has attached new consequences to these options. Yet this need not be always morally problematic. Some taxes pursue goals that justify coercion. Is it the case for the limitarian tax? To address this question, let us have a closer look at the idea that coercion invades autonomy. Drawing on Raz's analysis, it appears that coercion can invade autonomy in three ways. *First*, coercion *reduces the quantity and the quality of the options available* to the coerced agent. Coercion eliminates an option without creating a desirable alternative. *Second*, even when its effects on the agent's ability to freely choose the life she values are negligible, a coercive act remains problematic if it *insults the coercive agent's autonomy by treating her as a non-autonomous agent*. *Third*, coercive acts interfere with autonomy because they *deliberately change the agent's reasons for acting as she does*. Even milder forms of coercion erode autonomy because they increase the opportunity costs of acting against the will of the coercive agent and modify parts of the reasons for the agent to act as she does.

Is a limitarian coercive measure like a tax problematic in one of these respects? Regarding the reduction of available options, the limitarian tax might actually increase the range of options accessible to the agent. If the empirical hypotheses expounded in Section 3 are correct, excessive wealth develops dispositions such that the rich cannot seriously consider otherwise valuable options anymore. Limitarian coercive measures could create desirable options for the formerly rich, such as the option to become a professional baker.

What about the second way in which coercion invades autonomy? Does a limitarian tax invade the autonomy of those subjected to this tax *by failing to treat them as autonomous agents*? The autonomy-minded limitarian could say: a state which implements coercive measures does not express disrespect for the autonomy of its citizens *if* these measures are *precisely motivated by* a concern for individual autonomy (Raz 1986, 156–157).

If it is true that wealth undermines autonomy, a limitarian tax does not seriously invade autonomy in the first two respects. However, I submit that a limitarian tax justified by a concern for autonomy would interfere with the autonomy of the rich in the third respect because it *deliberately changes their reasons for acting as they do*. A coercive tax changes

the context of choice and thereby the reasons to choose an option rather than another (Waldron 1988, 1145–1146). A limitarian tax would induce the rich to become less rich not because they genuinely believe excessive wealth undermines their autonomy, but because they want to avoid paying even higher fines. Encouraging people to exercise their autonomy through financial penalties does not make them understand or commit to the autonomy-based reasons which motivate these penalties. Most likely, if the rich do not endorse the goal these fiscal policies attempt to promote, they will merely try to get around them and hide their money in tax heavens. Furthermore, recall that the account of autonomy the paper's argument relies on is relational. Treating a group of people as agents who are not fully autonomous would fail to meet one of the conditions of autonomy. An autonomy-promoting society should enable the agent to regard herself as capable and authorised to define her commitments and act in accordance with them. These conditions include self-trust, self-respect as well as being recognised and treated by others (including state agents) as an autonomous agent. Even mandatory autonomy-promoting education requires educators to recognise and treat children as much as possible as autonomous agents, taking into account their age and developmental stage.

An autonomy-based limitarian tax may thus invade rather than promote the rich's autonomy in one respect, that is, in that it may prevent the rich from acting upon their own, authentically formed reasons. But it is not sure this consideration should detract autonomy-based normative theories from giving further consideration to limitarian coercive measures. Firstly, one might conjecture that, through the five mechanisms suggested above, excessive wealth might be more damaging to the formation of autonomous conceptions of the good life than the limitation of freedom involved by wealth taxes. But this is conjectural. Secondly, if we consider the limitarian tax not as a stand-alone policy, but as a complement to other policy measures, its problematic aspects dissipate.

Consider how the autonomy-promoting limitarian tax would fit in with a more general theory of distributive justice.²⁷ Even though the primary purpose of a limitarian tax is not redistributive, the argument deployed here suggests the fiscal implications of distributive justice might, as it happens, concur with the promotion of autonomy. Liberal,

27 This paragraph owes a lot to a discussion with George Pavlakos.

autonomy-based, theories of justice can respond to the libertarian objection that redistributive taxation is an illegitimate use of coercive power (e.g. Nozick, 1974: 167–174) along the following lines. The use of coercive power is legitimate if it is necessary to prevent the coerced agent from causing harm to others (Raz 1986, 412–420). From an autonomy-based perspective, a person is harmed when her autonomy is diminished. If a sufficientarian distribution of wealth is necessary to secure autonomy, redistributive compulsory taxation aiming at securing such distribution is morally legitimate. If Rawlsian egalitarian distributive principles (or other distributive principles, such as sufficientarian ones) were agreed upon by reasonable citizens, taxation could be a permissible tool to bring about the legitimate distribution of wealth. Whether we endorse a monist, autonomy-based, conception of distributive justice, or a pluralist one, combining autonomy and equality, the use of coercive power through compulsory taxation to bring about the just distribution of wealth seems legitimate. Yet this line of argument cannot, by itself, invalidate the claim that redistributive taxation requires interference with the autonomy of the taxpayer. It can only justify such interference either on the grounds that redistribution ultimately increases the autonomy of the beneficiaries or on grounds other than autonomy.²⁸ In other words, if we accept that redistribution interferes with taxpayers' autonomy, the justificatory burden inevitably falls on the shoulders of the liberal champions of redistributive taxation. They must provide sufficient justifications to show that redistributive taxation either increases other people's autonomy or protects and promotes other values (such as equality), which have to be balanced against the value of autonomy. But, thanks to the limitarian argument, they might not have to do that. If the standard assumption that wealth is always beneficial to autonomy is not true, as suggested in Section 3, then redistributive taxation does not interfere with autonomy (at least above the limitarian lines). Challenging this standard assumption lightens the burden of justification liberal champions of redistributive tax-and-transfer schemes must bear. And the distributive justice-based legitimation of coercive taxation provides autonomy-based limitarianism

28 For example, Rawls (1999, para. 43) argues that taxation is justified insofar as it contributes to the provision of public goods and to the realisation of the difference principle.

with an escape from the challenge that coercion might not be the best way to enforce autonomy.²⁹

Another line of defence against the worry that coercion damages autonomy suggests the limitarian tax could be considered a *catalyst* rather than a *constraint*. Autonomy-based limitarianism is likely to imply that educational institutions should encourage the development of limitarian dispositions. Educators should discourage the pursuit of wealth beyond what is necessary to secure adequate autonomy. Such educational practices, if consistent with the development of deliberative and critical thinking skills, would equip learners with the capacity to find, reflect on, endorse and possibly challenge the autonomy-based reasons for not becoming too rich. Would such educational policies dispense society with limitarian taxation? Perhaps not in a society like ours, in which wealth and materialistic pursuits are highly valued. In such a society, it might be appropriate to prevent people from becoming too rich through compulsory taxation even though they endorse the philosophical arguments in favour of limitarianism. In such a society, expecting people to act on limitarian reasons may be excessively demanding, because it would require them to run counter to established social norms. Those who received an education aiming at cultivating limitarian dispositions might fully agree with limitarian values, and yet find themselves unable to act upon them. Phenomena such as commercial advertising, peer pressure, expectations from partners and children, the way the labour and consumption market are organised, how the urban environment is shaped, hinder our capacity to live autonomously. This is why education, or at least school education, may not suffice to discourage the pursuit of material wealth in our societies.

29 Another potential objection to coercive redistributive tax-and-transfer schemes might appeal to desert. According to this objection, redistributive taxation is wrong when it prevents the hard-working and the competent from receiving money in accord with what she deserves (desert being measured either according to her level of effort or to her level of contribution). Rawls's (1999, 246) discussion of desert and the difference principle casts doubt on the desert objection by pointing out that our talents, capacity to contribute and willingness to put forth effort can often be traced to "undeserved contingencies" such as "class and natural abilities". Note also that, even if the desert objection were valid, it would not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the rich are owed their wealth, since wealth might be detrimental to them. Society should not reward deserving people with defective goods. I thank an anonymous reviewer for having pointed this objection to me.

Whereas if we were just prevented from becoming to wealthy and thereby to adopt expensive lifestyles, we could reconcile the values we have reasons to have with our patterns of behaviour. Therefore, if it is coupled with genuinely autonomy-promoting education, compulsory limitarian taxation can thus help people to live in accordance with their own reasons. Taxation would be a catalyst, not an interference.

The result of the discussion of the first potential objection to autonomy-based the limitarian tax may be summarised as follows. The discussion draws from Raz's account of the relationships between autonomy and coercion. A limitarian tax is a coercive measure. A coercive measure is morally problematic if it invades autonomy or if it could count as a justification or as a complete excuse for the coerced act (Raz 1986, 150).³⁰ The limitarian tax seems unlikely to have repercussions on whether the actions of those who would pay this tax would be justifiable or excusable. Hence a limitarian tax is above all justified if it does not invade autonomy. If the thesis that wealth may restrict the rich's options is true, a limitarian tax does not invade autonomy by restricting the rich's options. Nor does it fail to treat the rich as an autonomous agent since the tax is motivated by a concern for the rich's autonomy.³¹ Nevertheless, the tax invades the rich's autonomy in a third way, by deliberately changing their reasons for action. But such consideration should not detract us from giving autonomy-based limitarianism further consideration. First, autonomy-based reasons may work as a complementary justification for tax-and-transfer schemes aiming at securing an egalitarian or a sufficientarian redistribution. Second, if limitarian taxes are implemented in conjunction with limitarian education, they will work as a catalyst by helping people to live in accordance with the values they acquired through education.

30 There could be other grounds for condemning coercion from a liberal perspective, but since the article is mostly concerned with the value of autonomy I shall stick to Raz's account.

31 By "motivated by a concern for the rich's autonomy", I do not mean that the actual individuals, political representatives, policy-makers or administrators, would be necessarily motivated by such concern (whatever motivates people to strive for the realization of justice and political morality is often complex and consists in a mix of moral, quasi-moral and non-moral motives). I mean the tax could be justified on the ground that it protects the rich's autonomy, and such justification would follow from valid factual and normative premises.

6. The Incentive Objection

Suppose society becomes limitarian thanks to a combination of fiscal policies and educational practices. A limitarian society might face the following challenge. Insofar as members of such limitarian society would remain self-interested maximisers,³² a widespread limitarian ethos may cause them to substitute leisure for income once they have reached a given threshold of wealth. Now, suppose some people have more economically productive capacities than others. If such people ceased to be attracted by the prospect of high earnings, one of the incentives to contribute significantly to the creation of wealth by working more would disappear. Those who are below the sufficientarian threshold, would not benefit any more from their efforts.

The challenge seems akin to the problem addressed by the theory of optimal taxation.³³ However, the theory of optimal taxation does not have autonomy as its main focus. The theory of optimal tax progressivity assumes that policies should aim to increase social welfare. A theory of justice derived from the principle that autonomy is of primary moral importance does not have social welfare as its primary goal. Therefore, such theory draws different conclusions with respect to the extent to which the high-skilled should be motivated to work hard in order to contribute to the less lucky citizens. The social and economic objective is to secure the material capital society needs to guarantee everyone the capacity to develop and exercise autonomy.

If what matters is securing the economic, social and political condition of autonomy, the high-skilled should only be motivated to work *to the extent that it is necessary to secure such conditions*. It is unnecessary to incentivise them to create wealth beyond what is needed to secure autonomy. In Section 4, I have suggested these conditions include a sufficientarian-limitarian distribution of wealth. They would also include the material costs of securing other conditions of autonomy development, such as the implementation of an autonomy-promoting

32 Perhaps non-economic attitudes, such as a commitment to the well-being of one's community, would suffice to motivate the high-skilled to contribute by working harder in a limitarian society. But this is speculative.

33 The seminal contribution that posed the problem of optimal tax progressivity in terms of maximising a social welfare function is an article by Mirrlees (1971). For a synthesis of the evolutions of the theory of optimal taxation since Mirrlees's article, see: Slemrod (2006).

educational system. How much social wealth would be necessary to secure autonomy remains a question that I have no space to adequately address here. One might guess that, in such a society, individual shares of material wealth might not be necessarily very high. However, the aim of developing a reasonably ambitious level of autonomy might require significant investments in collective goods such as educational institutions of various sorts. Provision of adequate health care and of a financial safety net might also be needed. Therefore, we cannot exclude that securing autonomy might require a quite high social product. If so, autonomy-based distributive justice theorists have to reflect on the morally permissible and desirable ways to induce the most competent to create high levels of social products without being able to earn more than the wealth ceiling.

7. Conclusion

This article has attempted to support the plausibility of two empirical hypotheses regarding the impact of excessive wealth on autonomy: (i) above a certain wealth ceiling, a person's having more material resources does not always increase her autonomy; (ii) above such wealth ceiling, material possession might even be detrimental to the development and the exercise of rich people's autonomy, or at least some rich people. Starting from a relational account of autonomy, this paper has discussed five mechanisms that may challenge the standard assumption that material wealth always increases autonomy. Such mechanisms even suggest excessive material wealth could be detrimental to autonomy in a number of ways. The article has also suggested (Section 4.2) that these mechanisms may provide helpful guidance to determine a wealth ceiling. The next part of the paper has investigated whether, if it is true that excessive wealth undermines autonomy, autonomy promotion may justify coercive measures such as taxation. It might be the case in one respect: coercive measures alone tend to fail to commit those subjected to them to their rationale. However, it appears that, if a limitarian tax is coupled with either redistributive purposes or autonomy-promoting educational policies, concerns raised by the effects of coercion of autonomy might dissipate. In particular, if limitarian fiscal policies aligned with educational practices, autonomy-promoting taxation would become a device that would help people to act upon what they

have reason to value rather than a coercive measure. But the problem of incentives might remain: in a limitarian society, the material incentive to contribute more to the social product would be less strong. The extent to which this would be problematic would depend on the extent to which securing sufficient autonomy would require creating high levels of wealth.

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5. Limitarianism: Pattern, Principle, or Presumption?

Dick Timmer

1. Introduction

In this article, I assess the prospects for the limitarian thesis that there is some wealth threshold, the ‘limitarian threshold’, such that someone has too much wealth if they exceed that threshold.¹ Drawing on recent literature on distributive justice, I defend two types of limitarian principles of justice.² First, limitarian *midlevel principles* draw on the limitarian thesis to specify normative commitments for guiding institutional design and individual actions. Second, the limitarian *presumption* draws on that thesis to specify what a just allocation of wealth requires under epistemic constraints. I will argue in favour of both limitarian midlevel principles and the limitarian presumption.

This article is structured as follows. After introducing limitarianism and the arguments supporting it (Section 2), I will first argue that we must reject a possible but implausible interpretation of limitarianism as an ideal distributive pattern (Section 3). I then argue in favour of two types of nonideal limitarianism, namely limitarian midlevel principles

1 On limitarianism, see Robeyns 2017; 2019; Zwarthoed 2018; Volacu and Dumitru 2019; Harel Ben Shahaar Mimeo; cf. Neuhäuser 2018. I use the term ‘wealth’ to refer to the bundle of economic resources an individual possesses. I will focus on economic limitarianism. However, limitarianism is also applicable to other valuable goods, such as emissions or natural resources.

2 There may, of course, be other ways to interpret the limitarian thesis, for example as an ethical principle for individual action. However, I will limit myself to limitarianism as a principle of justice.

(Section 4) and the limitarian presumption (Section 5). I end by reflecting on the role of limitarianism in distributive justice (Section 6).

2. Limitarianism and Surplus Wealth

Ingrid Robeyns recently coined the term *limitarianism* and argued that it has a place in thinking about the demands of distributive justice.³ She defines the view as follows:

Limitarianism advocates that it is not morally permissible to have more resources than are needed to fully flourish in life. Limitarianism views having riches or wealth to be the state in which one has more resources than are needed and claims that, in such a case, one has too much, morally speaking.⁴

At the heart of this defence of limitarianism lies what we may call the flourishing claim. This is the claim that above some wealth threshold having more wealth does not contribute to one's flourishing and therefore has 'zero moral weight'.⁵ We have reasons to redistribute such 'surplus wealth' if that promotes some morally valuable aim(s), such as political equality or eradicating poverty.

Yet limitarianism need not commit itself to this flourishing threshold. The limitarian threshold could also signal, say, sufficiency in some other metric of advantage, or the level of the threshold could be set by investigating when allowing people to accumulate more wealth upsets some important normative concern, such as political equality or equality of opportunity.⁶ Therefore, the crucial limitarian claim is that there are good political and/or ethical reasons to prevent people from having

3 Cf. Robeyns 2017; 2019.

4 Robeyns 2017, 1.

5 Robeyns 2017, 12. On the flourishing threshold, see Robeyns 2017, 14–30.

6 If so, the limitarian threshold should be set with reference to those specific normative concerns. For instance, to promote political equality limits to wealth should factor in considerations of relative differences. The reason the superrich can undermine democratic procedures is not fully explained by how much wealth they have, but also by how much they have compared to others. Limitarian threshold should take this into account. Furthermore, it may be that distinct arguments for limitarianism suggest different thresholds, which must then be balanced with each other. For a discussion on various ways to set the limitarian threshold, see Harel Ben Shahar (mimeo). I thank an anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* for this point.

more than a certain amount of wealth. In short, limitarianism claims that people should not have surplus wealth.

The claim that people should not have surplus wealth can be justified on at least three different grounds. I will spell them out explicitly because limitarians need not tie their case too closely to one particular reason. And even those who reject one or two reasons for why surplus wealth should be redistributed might still be drawn to limitarianism because of the other reason, which broadens the scope of limitarian theorizing.

The first reason to redistribute surplus wealth could be that it has zero moral value, which simply means that nothing morally valuable can be gained from having it. On this view, all other things being equal, a world in which some people have surplus wealth is not preferable over a world in which no one has surplus wealth. I take it that this is why Robeyns says that surplus wealth has zero moral weight, for example, when she says that the ‘argument for urgent unmet needs is based on the premise that the value of surplus income is morally insignificant for the holder of that income’.⁷

The second reason to redistribute surplus wealth could be that it has moral value but that this value is lexically outweighed by some other normative concern(s). This does not deny that something morally valuable can be gained from having surplus wealth, nor that, all else being equal, sometimes people should be allowed to have surplus wealth. But whatever can be gained from having surplus wealth is less valuable, morally speaking, than other normative concerns.

The third reason to redistribute surplus wealth could be that in practice allowing people to have surplus wealth is less important, morally speaking, than other normative concerns; yet, at least in theory, allowing people to have surplus wealth could outweigh those concerns. For instance, someone might prefer a distribution in which one person lives in poverty but all others have surplus wealth over a distribution in which everyone lives just above the poverty threshold. This would conflict with the limitarian thesis that someone has too much wealth if they exceed the limitarian threshold. But even if one holds such a view, in the actual world so many people are below the poverty threshold

⁷ Robeyns 2017, 13. Emphasis in original.

that the reasons for allowing people to have surplus wealth are simply outweighed by the reasons for redistributing it.

Robeyns gives three reasons why people should not have surplus wealth.⁸ The democratic argument states that extreme wealth undermines political equality and fairness in democratic procedures.⁹ The needs argument states that extreme wealth should be used to meet people's urgent needs, such as by lifting them from poverty or by financing solutions to urgent collective action problems.¹⁰ And according to the ecological argument, the wealth of the superrich should be used to finance climate mitigation and adaptation.¹¹ This article asks the following question: if we are concerned with political equality, meeting urgent needs, and disruptive climate change, does this justify the limitarian thesis in distributive justice that someone has too much wealth if they exceed the limitarian threshold?

Robeyns defends limitarianism in nonideal circumstances, taking the current distribution of wealth as her starting point.¹² However, Robeyns' initial formulation of limitarianism leaves open what kind of principle it is exactly. This calls for further elaboration because, as I will argue below, not all interpretations of limitarianism are equally plausible and each of them has different implications. I distinguish three ways in which limitarianism can be interpreted as a principle of justice: it can be seen as (i) a distributive pattern, (ii) a midlevel principle, or (iii) a presumption. In what follows, I will assess the prospects for limitarianism in distributive justice and argue in favour of limitarian midlevel principles and the limitarian presumption.

3. Limitarianism as an ideal distributive pattern

We must first examine a possible but implausible interpretation of limitarianism, which I will refer to as ideal pattern limitarianism. Despite this interpretation being implausible and, to the best of my knowledge, not having any defenders, assessing that view serves two

8 For other arguments for limits to wealth, see Drewnowski 1978; Ramsay 2005; Zwarthoed 2018.

9 Cf. Robeyns 2017, 6–10; 2019, 254–56.

10 Cf. Robeyns 2017, 10–14; 2019, 257–58.

11 Cf. Robeyns 2019, 258–60.

12 Cf. Robeyns 2017, 2.

purposes: it shows why we must not be tempted to (uncharitably) interpret limitarianism as an ideal distributive pattern, and it will prove valuable later on to show why the objections to such ideal limitarianism do not apply to limitarianism as a nonideal view.¹³

Ideal patterns specify what distribution of valuable goods must be achieved or pursued in a just society. In this debate, the main contenders are egalitarianism, prioritarianism, and sufficientarianism.¹⁴ If limitarianism is interpreted along those lines, it claims that in an ideal world people should not exceed the limitarian threshold. We can interpret such ideal limitarianism as an all-things-considered view according to which it is always unjust if people exceed the limitarian threshold; or as a *pro tanto* view according to which distributions in which some people exceed the limitarian threshold are in at least one respect less just than distributions in which people do not exceed that threshold.

However, we must reject both interpretations of ideal pattern limitarianism. Limitarianism only claims that it is unjust to have surplus wealth *under nonideal conditions*, which includes, for example, the fact that the current distribution of wealth is vastly unequal, that the superrich have objectionably more political power than others, and that millions of people around the world live in extreme poverty. Limitarianism claims that having surplus wealth only becomes objectionable if we combine the idea of surplus wealth as having zero moral value or less moral value than other moral concerns with the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Yet none of the interpretations of the moral value of surplus wealth by itself imply that people should not have such wealth; and so, in ideal circumstances, people should be allowed to have surplus wealth. This is why we must reject ideal pattern limitarianism. There is nothing unjust about a distribution in which all normative concerns are met and some people exceed the limitarian threshold. Moreover, if surplus wealth has moral value for the holder, they may in fact be morally entitled to surplus wealth provided those normative concerns are met. But limitarian views

13 For example, see Section 5.4.

14 For egalitarianism, see M. O'Neill 2008; Temkin 2003a. For prioritarianism, see Parfit 1997; Holtug 2007. For sufficientarianism, see Shields 2012; Axelsen and Nielsen 2015.

are nonideal views that only apply under specific conditions. And so, those kinds of possible distributions do not count against limitarianism because in those distributions the conditions under which limitarianism applies do not hold.

Therefore, ideal pattern limitarianism should be rejected. However, that does not mean that we should reject the pursuit of limitarian distributions. I will argue that extreme wealth can only be just if we leave aside important nonideal considerations. Limitarian midlevel principles and limitarian presumptions, which are two different ways to unfold limitarianism in a nonideal form, do take such considerations into account. They both say that in our world and possible worlds similar to it we have good reasons to defend limitarianism despite the fact that, in an ideal world, limitarianism cannot be justified. In what follows, I will discuss those specifications of limitarianism in turn.

4. Limitarianism as a Midlevel Principle

If limitarianism is interpreted as a midlevel principle, it claims the following:¹⁵

Limitarian midlevel principle: no one should have wealth that exceeds the limitarian threshold.

Midlevel principles are moral principles that connect ‘theory’ and ‘circumstance’. By *theory*, I mean normative foundations, such as the greatest happiness principle, a conception of autonomy, a notion of moral equality, or some procedural conception of justice. By *circumstance* I mean the specific policies, rules, institutions, and individual actions that characterize the status quo. The reasons adduced in defence of limitarianism, such as the democratic argument, the needs argument, the ecological argument, and the account of flourishing, can be understood as arguing in favour of limitarian midlevel principles in circumstances characterized by wealth inequality, unequal political power, extreme poverty, and disruptive climate change.

¹⁵ Midlevel principles are increasingly prominent in public policy areas; see, for example Thompson 2002; Lever 2012; Fraser 2012. They also play a crucial role in bioethics; Beauchamp and Childress 2001. For further discussion, see Sandin and Peterson 2019.

Limitarianism can draw support from what Cass Sunstein labels ‘incompletely theorized agreement’¹⁶ in which agreement exists on specific propositions or outcomes, but there is no agreement on the general theory that accounts for it. Both sufficientarians and prioritarians, for instance, can agree that justice requires the eradication of poverty and support 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 prioritarians supports limitarianism because the poor have weighted priority. Limitarian midlevel principles bypass such foundational disagreement and enable agreement about normative commitments in specific cases.

Midlevel principles specify *pro tanto* commitments that must be carefully balanced in light of other normative commitments and the particulars of specific cases.¹⁷ Such principles must be assessed in light of the ability of the state to administer and enforce the policies, rules, and institutions they promote, their likely incentivizing effects, concerns about efficiency, effectivity, and public support, trade-offs with other midlevel principles, and so forth.¹⁸ To illustrate, Marc Fleurbaey claims that ‘imposing a 100 percent marginal tax rate [is] a recipe for economic collapse’.¹⁹ If this is obviously true and clearly so for those theorizing about what justice requires, limitarian midlevel principles are unlikely to be a valuable contribution to thinking about, say, institutional schemes that optimally promote justice in income taxation (assuming that limitarianism indeed proposes a 100 percent marginal tax rate). I do not think this is obviously true at all. But even if limitarian midlevel principles would seriously hamper economic activity, such principles can still serve as a frame to shift the Overton window, and they might still move the superrich to act for limitarian reasons.²⁰

16 Cf. Sunstein 1995; see also Bayles 1986, 62; Wolff 2019, 14–15.

17 Cf. John 2010, 14.

18 On limits to wealth and public opinion, see Davis et al. 2020; Robeyns et al. 2021.

19 Fleurbaey 2018, 40.

20 Importantly, endorsing midlevel principles in a specific context does not commit one to endorsing them in others too; similarly, rejecting limitarian midlevel principles in one context does not mean that they must be rejected in all others. And we might even endorse limitarian midlevel principles in specific contexts for a specific purpose but not for others—for example, to motivate the superrich but not to guide institutional design. As an example, someone might think that income

However, one might object that defending limitarian midlevel principles only pushes back the problem of justifying limitarianism.²¹ There are two types of cases we might imagine when considering the possibility of an incompletely theorized agreement on limitarianism. The first involve proponents of different perspectives who are considering whether to converge upon a single shared conception of limitarianism. Here I have this first type of cases in mind. But another type of cases is relevant as well, namely if proponents of limitarianism disagree about what form the limitarian threshold should take. For instance, some might defend higher thresholds than others, or defend limitarian principles to guide institutions but not individual agents. However, one might question what good it is to converge upon limitarianism as a midlevel principle if there is disagreement as to what form such a principle should take in practice.

In response, note that even if there is disagreement about the exact limitarian threshold, different proponents of limitarian midlevel principles can still agree on procedures to determine that threshold, such as by voting or consulting experts. And they may prefer such a threshold over having no wealth limit at all, even if the threshold they agree upon is different from what they regard as the best threshold. The need for such agreement is simply a feature of the context in which limitarian midlevel principles are deployed. However, and importantly, there may be less disagreement about what form limitarianism should take in some important cases. Let me discuss two such cases, drawing on Robeyns' needs argument and ecological argument, to show how limitarian midlevel principles can inform institutional design and individual actions.

The needs argument states that surplus wealth should be used to meet people's urgent needs. This argument is not really controversial. Many people, for example, including egalitarians, prioritarians, and sufficientarians, believe that we have strong normative reasons to eradicate poverty.²² And following Peter Singer's canonical work on this

earned on the labour market is 'deserved' in the moral sense but that income from inheritance is not, allowing limitarian policies in the context of inheritance taxation but not in the context of income taxation.

21 I thank an anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* for raising this objection.

22 See, for example Nussbaum 2000; Blake 2001; Crisp 2003; Miller 2007; Hayek 2011.

topic, effective altruists have argued for this claim for a long time.²³ They all agree that those who possess wealth above some high threshold have specific duties to eradicate poverty, even though they disagree about what gives rise to those duties, whether they are ethical and/or moral duties, or whether these duties should be discharged through governmental policies or individual actions. Importantly, it is not because egalitarians, prioritarrians, sufficientarians, and others attach value to the limitarian threshold per se that they can agree that those who have wealth that exceeds that threshold have special moral obligations. In the context of poverty alleviation, then, limitarian midlevel principles can inform institutional design and individual actions.

According to the ecological argument, we must use surplus wealth to help address climate mitigation and climate adaptation.²⁴ First, the rich are responsible for a disproportionate amount of emissions compared to others and therefore have greater individual responsibility to combat dangerous climate change. Second, the industries that have allowed people to accumulate vast amounts of wealth, such as the oil industry, are often carbon intensive. Designing institutions in such a way that the superrich are responsible for a significant part of the costs of climate mitigation and adaptation can therefore be regarded as compensation for negative externalities. Third, at least some of the wealth of the superrich comes from subsidized industries that are harmful to the environment. Taken together, these three reasons, according to Robeyns, justify limitarianism in this context. And thus, when thinking about policies in the context of climate change, those who agree with these reasons can all adopt a limitarian midlevel principle in that specific context.

Hence, limitarian midlevel principles aim to bridge the gap between theory and circumstance by saying that when theorizing about what justice requires in specific circumstances, there is a *pro tanto* claim that no one should have wealth that exceeds the limitarian threshold. And as such a principle, the limitarian thesis can be defended in distributive justice.

23 Cf. Singer 1972; Singer 2009.

24 Cf. Robeyns 2019, 258–60.

5. Limitarianism as a Presumption

Limitarians who claim that there is a presumption in favour of limitarianism endorse the following definition:

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.

I will argue in favour of such presumptive limitarianism in distributive justice. More precisely, justice requires a limitarian distribution of wealth unless we have substantive grounds to think otherwise. I will give three arguments for this. First, the widely held 'presumption in favour of equality' grounds a derivative 'presumption of limitarianism'.²⁵ Second, the idea of surplus wealth grounds presumptive limitarianism. And third, presumptive limitarianism can be derived from moral concerns such as political equality and meeting urgent needs if we factor in epistemic constraints.

Let me first clarify what a 'presumption' entails. A presumption is 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. Presumptions are often mistaken for substantive principles, but it is crucial to recognize the differences between them.²⁶ Substantive principles, such as ideal distributive patterns, tell us what we must do on the assumption that we know the relevant facts. But presumptions tell us how to act in the absence of knowledge about those facts. We can compare presumptions in distributive justice with the presumption of innocence in legal theory and the precautionary principle in environmental ethics and policy. The presumption of innocence tells us to treat someone as if they are innocent until they are proven guilty. And the precautionary principle tells us how to weigh different options in the absence of decisive evidence about what they will bring about.

25 I use 'presumption of limitarianism', 'presumptive limitarianism', and the 'limitarian presumption' interchangeably.

26 E.g. Westen 1990, 253; Gosepath 2015, 182; Stark 2019. We must also distinguish presumptions from pro tanto claims. For example, pro tanto pattern limitarianism claims that it is in at least one sense unjust if some people's wealth exceeds the limitarian threshold. However, presumptive limitarianism does not rest on the assumption that people should not be allowed to exceed the limitarian threshold.

Similarly, presumptions in distributive justice tell us what distributive justice requires in the absence of substantive grounds to favour specific distributions.

5.1. Presumptive Limitarianism and the Presumption of Equality

The limitarian presumption can be derived from the egalitarian presumption. Let me illustrate the egalitarian presumption with an example.²⁷ Suppose Jesse wants to distribute some valuable goods between Adam and Eve depending on who of them writes the longest poem. Unfortunately, however, the poems get lost before Jesse can read them, and there is no way for him to tell whether Adam or Eve drafted the longest poem. Given this uncertainty, Jesse decides to distribute the valuable goods evenly between them. This is not because he believes that they are equally deserving of it—that is, after all, something Jesse cannot know without reading the poems. In fact, he might believe that they are not equally deserving. But in the absence of the relevant information, it seems most just for Jesse to presume that Adam and Eve are equally deserving. This is the egalitarian presumption in distributive justice.

Now suppose Jesse distributes valuable goods between Adam and Eve according to some substantive moral principle, such as a conception of ‘desert’ or ‘weighted priority’. Again, however, Jesse lacks information about the extent to which Adam and Eve meet that criterion. Now consider the following distributions between Adam and Eve:

	Adam	Eve
Distribution A	2	2
Distribution B	3	1
Distribution C	1	3
Distribution D	4	0
Distribution E	0	4

²⁷ For a defence and discussion of the presumption of equality, see Räikkä 2019. This example draws on Räikkä 2019, 814–17. Räikkä also discusses some objections to this specific case, for example, that it may be fair for Jesse not to distribute the valuable good at all. I will leave that aside here.

On the assumption that Jesse lacks knowledge about how many goods Adam and Eva are entitled to on substantive grounds, the egalitarian presumption favours distribution A. In A, Adam and Eve can both at most be overpaid two goods or underpaid two goods. In contrast, in B and C, they can be overpaid or underpaid up to three goods. And in D and E, they can be overpaid or underpaid up to four goods. Following the presumption of equality, then, A is most risk averse, B and C are less risk averse than A but more risk averse than D and E, and D and E are least risk averse (or most risk tolerant). Because of this, it is presumptively just, according to the presumption of equality, to distribute the valuable goods equally between Adam and Eve.

If we now consider the distribution of wealth rather than of generic valuable goods, the presumption of equality holds that people should have equal amounts of wealth unless we have substantive reasons suggesting otherwise. In general, the larger Adam's share of wealth relative to Eve's share, the less just Adam's share is likely to be. This supports presumptive limitarianism by implication. Presumptive limitarianism is likely to reduce or at least constrain objectionable inequality by setting an upper threshold on how much wealth people can have.

The presumption of limitarianism is less demanding than the presumption of equality. This is because presumptive limitarianism specifies a broader range of possible distributions that are equally just. If, for example, the limitarian threshold deems that having four valuable goods or more is unjust, then, unlike the presumption of equality, it is agnostic between distributions A, B, and C. The presumption of equality, then, grounds a derivative presumption of limitarianism. But the relation is not biconditional: one can endorse presumptive limitarianism without endorsing the presumption of equality.

Alternatively, we can also think of presumptive limitarianism as a specification of what the presumption of equality requires. Presumptive limitarianism specifies what justice requires in the distribution of wealth specifically. But this is compatible with endorsing the presumption of equality as the overarching fundamental normative principle. For example, the presumption of equality might require a distribution of primary goods or capabilities that is equal, which implies, when it comes to wealth specifically, that the distribution of wealth must be limitarian.

Hence, the presumption of limitarianism can be defended as an implication of the presumption of equality in distributive justice and/or as a specification of a more fundamental presumption of equality in the context of the distribution of wealth.

5.2. Presumptive limitarianism and surplus wealth

The second argument for presumptive limitarianism takes as its point of departure the limitarian claim that some people have surplus wealth.²⁸ As I argued in Section 2, the idea of surplus wealth can be grounded on three different claims, namely that above some threshold wealth has zero moral value, that it is lexically outweighed by some other normative concern(s), or that, in practice, allowing people to have surplus wealth has less moral value than redistributing it. Those who agree that under one or more of those interpretations some people have surplus wealth must endorse presumptive limitarianism.

Recall distributions *C* and *D*.

	Adam	Eve
Distribution C	1	3
Distribution D	4	0

Let us again assume that Jesse must distribute valuable goods between Adam and Eve but that he lacks the relevant information to distribute those goods on substantive grounds. Furthermore, let us assume that people exceed the limitarian threshold if they have more than three goods. If the distributions are wealth distributions, this means that in *C* neither Adam nor Eve has surplus wealth and that in *D* Adam has surplus wealth but Eve does not.

Above I argued that the presumption of equality prefers *C* over *D* because *C* is more equal and that this supports presumptive limitarianism by implication. But we can derive a similar conclusion from the observation that only in *C* no one possesses surplus wealth. If, as presumptions in distributive justice entertain, a risk-averse distribution

²⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* for suggesting this line of argument.

is preferable over a risk-tolerant distribution, then a distribution that redistributes surplus wealth is preferable over a distribution that allows people to have surplus wealth. Between *C* and *D*, then, *C* is the most risk-averse distribution because only in *C* is there no surplus wealth. Therefore, the idea that some people have surplus wealth justifies the limitarian presumption.

One might object here that Adam could be really deserving of four goods, and, because of that, *D* is preferable over *C* on substantive grounds. However, if wealth above the limitarian threshold really is surplus wealth, it is difficult to see how someone could be deserving of it, *morally speaking*. Whatever substantive reasons we have for favouring *D* over *C*, if having more than three goods means that one has surplus wealth, those reasons cannot be that Adam is entitled to four goods. Instead, those reasons must be that allowing Adam to have more than three goods has other morally significant benefits. I will come back to this objection in Section 5.4.

5.3. Presumptive Limitarianism and Epistemic Constraints

The third argument for presumptive limitarianism is that decision-makers often lack the epistemic grounds to apply substantive principles for distributing wealth fairly.²⁹ Joseph Heath, for example, argues that substantive principles concerning the distribution of labour income fail to give a plausible account of how labour income must be and is in fact distributed.³⁰ He concludes that markets are structurally unable to deliver 'just' wages because markets only channel labour to its best employment. And a similar case can be made for other economic resources. In an ideal market, for example, capital too is channelled to its most productive usage, where 'productive' means that it increases a specific conception of welfare.

To give another example, luck egalitarians have long since argued that it is often impossible to know what people's relative advantages and

29 At least for distributing economic resources from specific sources of income. For example, there is a wide consensus among political philosophers that inheritance taxation is unjust on substantive grounds and that we have the relevant information to track that injustice. Cf. Pedersen 2018.

30 Cf. Heath 2018.

disadvantages are in the real world. This point extends to all proponents of substantive principles that require knowledge about individual's comparative standing to specify what distributive justice requires. As Richard Arneson puts it:

the idea that we might adjust our distributive-justice system based on our estimation of persons' overall deservingness or responsibility seems entirely chimerical. Individuals do not display responsibility scores on their foreheads, and the attempt by institutions or individuals to guess at the scores of people they are dealing with would surely dissolve in practice into giving vent to one's prejudices and piques.³¹

Hence, although justice is certainly concerned with the distribution of wealth, it is not evident that we know what justice requires regarding that distribution in the actual world on substantive grounds.

However, many people believe that what we do know is what justice more broadly requires.³² For example, the democratic argument rests on the assumption that justice requires that political equality is secured, and such a commitment to political equality is widely shared. And the needs argument suggests that justice requires that those with urgent needs have priority. If limiting the accumulation of wealth and/or redistributing it promotes those aims, we have presumptive grounds to distribute wealth in such a way that it respects certain limits. And importantly, the democratic argument and the needs argument do not require knowledge about individual persons to specify justice in the allocation of wealth between them. We do not need information about Adam and Eve to specify what presumptive justice in the allocation of wealth between them requires. But, according to the limitarian presumption, what we do know is that a distribution between Adam and Eve in which neither of them 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.

³¹ Arneson 2000, 97; cf. Dworkin 1981, 314. See also Herzog 2012.

³² I say 'actual' because one may endorse substantive principles that specify what justice requires if the relevant information is available. For example, if the distribution of economic resources should track the number of hours worked, we would have a clear substantive ground for distributing resources between Adam and Eve *if we know how many hours Adam and Eve have worked*. But I assume here that we lack that information.

Hence, if the democratic argument or the needs argument holds, presumptive limitarianism offers a plausible criterion for distributing wealth if we lack substantive grounds to favour specific distributions. And if the distribution of wealth is indeed such that it is impossible to know whether it tracks substantive principles, or if it is impossibly complex to apply those substantive principles to actual wealth distributions, presumptive limitarianism supports distributions in which people do not exceed the limitarian threshold.

5.4. Three Objections to Presumptive Limitarianism

Let me discuss three objections to the limitarian presumption. The first objection is that presumptive limitarianism falls prey to the same objection as ideal pattern limitarianism because it may fail to secure political equality and meeting urgent needs. This is because it seems to neglect possible allocations of wealth that are to the maximum advantage of the lesser off. For example, consider the following two distributions:

	Adam	Eve
Distribution C	1	3
Distribution F	2	4

Distributions *C* and *F* differ in that the total amount of wealth in each of them is different. In *C*, neither Adam nor Eve exceeds the limitarian threshold of three goods. In *F*, however, Eve does exceed that threshold. But in *F* Adam is better off than in *C*. So which distribution should we prefer? If presumptive limitarianism renders *C* more just, it commits itself to the claim that people should not exceed the threshold, yet it does so at the expense of Adam who could be better off. Yet if it renders *F* more just, it commits itself to a distribution that allows people to exceed the limitarian threshold. This robs presumptive limitarianism of the distinctive limitarian claim that a distribution is unjust if some people exceed the limitarian threshold. Hence, presumptive limitarianism seems implausible here for the same reason as ideal limitarian patterns are implausible.

However, limitarians can say two things in response. The first is that presumptive limitarianism is irrelevant if we have substantive grounds

for favouring certain distributions. If we know that redistributing surplus wealth makes those below the limitarian threshold worse off, the presumptive limitarian reason becomes irrelevant. But it is only because we *know* that Adam is better off in *F* than in *C* that we favour *F* over *C*. This touches upon a crucial difference between patterns and presumptions. Patterns claim that justice-relevant goals, such as securing political equality and meeting urgent needs, can be met by pursuing a specific pattern. On the contrary, presumptions specify risk-averse principles that aim to minimize the harm of possible misallocations of valuable goods in light of epistemic uncertainty. The claim here is *not* that presumptive limitarianism leads to the pattern that will optimally promote the justice-relevant goals, but that it is most likely to do so given the epistemic constraints in place. If there are no such epistemic constraints, however, we no longer have to take the presumption into account.

The second response is that we might in fact believe that *C* is preferable over *F*, at least presumptively, because Adam might be worse off in *F*. Distributions *C* and *F* only indicate how much wealth Adam and Eve have, and it seems that, *from that specific perspective*, Adam is worse off in *C* than in *F* because in the latter distribution he has more wealth. However, that leaves open whether *F* leaves Adam worse off in some other morally valuable domain (e.g. social standing, political equality, etc.) despite the fact that he has more wealth in that distribution. Though presumptive limitarianism specifies what a just allocation of wealth requires, the reasons for defending such limitarianism extend beyond a specific concern for the distribution of wealth as such.

The second objection to presumptive limitarianism is that it offers an account of distributive justice that is too minimal and, furthermore, that it is already entailed in other distributive views. Because presumptive limitarianism only focusses on the superrich, it only offers a partial account of a presumptively just distribution. However, it need not exhaust what presumptive justice in the distribution of wealth requires, and it can be combined with other presumptions as well.³³ Furthermore, it may indeed be that egalitarianism, prioritarianism, sufficientarianism,

³³ For example, presumptive limitarianism can be combined with a sufficiency threshold. Such a threshold is defended as a minimal requirement for a just distribution under nonideal circumstances in Carey 2020.

and other distributive views could all accept the limitarian presumption when thinking about distributive justice in nonideal circumstances. Yet that is not an objection to presumptive limitarianism; at most, what is shown is that presumptive limitarianism, much like limitarian midlevel principles, can be defended from a variety of different perspectives. That only strengthens the prospects for limitarianism in distributive justice.

The third objection to presumptive limitarianism is that it is redundant because there is always at least *some* knowledge available to decision-makers to apply substantive principles. However, presumptive limitarianism can play a role in such cases too. For example, suppose justice requires distributing wealth based on the number of hours worked and that Adam works twice as many hours as Eve. Does the fact that we know this mean that Adam is entitled to twice as much wealth as Eve no matter what distribution we end up with? That does not follow. For one thing, it is not evident that the conversion of hours into wealth is such that working twice as many hours entitles one to twice as much wealth. Furthermore, it is not evident that distributing wealth on the basis of that substantive principle must guide the entire wealth distribution. For example, Adam and Eve may already have different levels of wealth, which may have a bearing on justice regarding additional benefits. The substantive principle might offer only a partial specification of justice in the distribution of wealth, in which case presumptive limitarianism holds for the remaining economic resources.

In short, the limitarian presumption can be derived from the presumption of equality, from the idea of surplus wealth, and it can be defended as a risk-averse strategy for distributing wealth given epistemic constraints. Those reasons are not mutually exclusive, of course, and may in fact strengthen each other. Yet each of them provides a distinctive case for the presumption of limitarianism in distributive justice.

6. Conclusion

The limitarian thesis states that there is a limitarian threshold such that someone has too much wealth if they exceed that threshold. In this article, I have assessed three ways in which the limitarian thesis can be defended in distributive justice, namely as an ideal distributive pattern, as a midlevel principle, and as a presumption. I have argued

that limitarianism must be rejected as an ideal principle and that it should be interpreted and developed along nonideal lines instead. More specifically, both as a midlevel principle and as a presumption, limitarianism can play a role in distributive justice. In particular, I have argued that without substantive reasons to the contrary, we have reasons to regard a distribution as unjust if some people's wealth exceeds the limitarian threshold. And given the current disparities in income and wealth between the rich and the poor, and in light of the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a small global elite, limitarianism can play an important role at that.

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6. The Limits of Limitarianism

Robert Huseby

1. Introduction

Limitarianism is a view of distributive justice according to which there is an upper limit, or threshold, to the amount of goods (for instance money, resources, welfare, or capabilities) that people can permissibly have.¹ This view is interesting, though somewhat perplexing, since most accounts of distributive justice emphasize what people ought to have, rather than what they ought not to have.²

In this article, I assess limitarianism in both instrumental and intrinsic versions.³ I start by examining Ingrid Robeyns's *instrumental* form of limitarianism, since this is the most elaborate and detailed version currently available in the literature. It emerges, however, that this theory, while in many ways plausible, is not limitarian as such. It might well have limitarian-like implications when applied under a certain range of non-ideal conditions, but it does not amount to real

1 Robeyns 2017, 2019. Note that this article assesses limitarianism as set out in Robeyns (2017, 2019). Robeyns (2022) specifies and revises limitarianism in ways that I cannot take fully into account here (though I will occasionally refer to some such revisions).

2 That said, Kramm and Robeyns (2020) find traces of “proto-limitarian” arguments in Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, John Maynard Keynes, Karl Marx, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill.

3 I assume throughout that something is intrinsically good if it is good in itself (regardless of whether it is, in addition, good in virtue of promoting some other good), and that something is instrumentally good in virtue of promoting some other good (see O’Neill 2008; Robeyns 2017, 5; Temkin 2003, 768). Note that limitarianism could be valuable in other ways as well. It could, for instance, have constitutive value. For reasons of space, however, I must leave such further possibilities aside here.

instrumental limitarianism. Rather, it is a view best seen as a combination of instrumental egalitarianism and sufficientarianism.⁴

Further, and more generally, I argue that it is hard to envision a compelling version of *intrinsic* limitarianism.⁵ Robeyns suggests (but explicitly refrains from endorsing) some possibilities, based on virtue, paternalism, and perfectionism. None of these holds much promise, however, primarily because they do not amount to intrinsic *limitarianism*. Rather, they appear to be based (unsurprisingly) on the intrinsic value of virtue, paternalism, and perfectionism, respectively. There might be values—for instance some virtues—that have limitarian-like features, but these are most likely of limited value to the debate on distributive justice. I also consider another possibility based more directly on the (supposed) badness of having too much. This version too turns out to be unconvincing.

Next, I return to instrumental limitarian views, and consider Danielle Zwarthoed's proposal for an instrumental limitarianism based on the value of personal autonomy. This account also, like Robeyns's, is in my view best understood in light of a non-limitarian principle (sufficientarianism).⁶ Thus, the so-far leading attempts at defending instrumental limitarianism do not seem to work qua limitarianism. In addition, any form of instrumental limitarianism, must rely on some more fundamental, intrinsic value. Since I raise serious doubts as to the possibility of there being plausible forms of intrinsic limitarianism (see above), this intrinsic value must be something else—for instance, egalitarianism, sufficientarianism, or autonomy. If these claims are sound, it is not clear that we need limitarianism as a distinct and independent principle of distributive justice.

Further, I assess the suggestion that limitarianism might be valuable as a more limited principle, as a 'presumption' to be relied on under certain epistemic conditions, rather than as a more general (intrinsic or instrumental) principle of distributive justice. I also briefly consider the idea that limitarianism might have value as a more impactful principle

4 See, however, Robeyns (2022) for a contrary view.

5 Intrinsic limitarianism has not to my knowledge been defended in the literature. However, since limitarianism is a relatively unfamiliar principle of distributive justice, it is interesting to consider whether it could come in plausible intrinsic versions.

6 Zwarthoed 2019.

than its contenders. I argue that neither of these limitarian versions are likely to be particularly helpful.

My overall conclusion, then, is that limitarianism is of very limited value to debates on distributive justice. I should nonetheless underline that not all possible forms of (instrumental and intrinsic) limitarianism can be assessed here, and that there could be other versions that are either more plausible, or more independent, than the ones I consider.⁷ Nevertheless, the conclusion, such as it is, does not bode well for limitarianism.

2. Robeyns's Instrumental Limitarianism

Limitarianism is in general characterized by the claim that “it is not morally permissible to have more resources than are needed to fully flourish in life.”⁸ Full flourishing is not specified in detail, but refers to having at least adequate capabilities in certain central respects. Beyond this level, it is morally impermissible to have surplus money, wealth, or other financial resources.⁹ Robeyns finds it “surprising that so little (if any) contemporary theorizing on justice has focused on the upper tail of income and wealth distribution.”¹⁰ Limitarianism is a response to this lack of normative research on the best off.

Robeyns's specific version of limitarianism is non-ideal. It does not constitute an answer to the question of what justice requires “in a world with strong idealized properties.”¹¹ It is also instrumental, because limitarianism is not seen as intrinsically valuable, but rather as necessary in our non-ideal world to realize “two intrinsic values: political equality

7 Robeyns (2022) draws a distinction between “theory-driven” and “problem-driven” forms of political theory. Problem-driven forms of political theory aim at solving actual problems in the real world, whereas theory-driven forms of political theory aim more exclusively at gaining moral knowledge (which is not to say that problem-driven theory is not concerned with moral knowledge.) She further argues that limitarianism might be valuable from a problem-driven perspective regardless of whether it is theoretically distinctive. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to consider this possibility in the present article.

8 Robeyns 2017, 1.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 4. Thus, (capability-based) flourishing is the metric of justice, and resources (including wealth and money) are (among the) *distribuenda*. See Gheaus 2018.

10 Robeyns 2017, 2. On the other hand, popular initiatives (including the Occupy Movement), and several economists (including Piketty 2014), have taken issue with the top end of the distribution: Robeyns 2017, 3.

11 Robeyns 2017, 2.

... and the meeting of unmet urgent needs."¹² Robeyns's defense of limitarianism thus consists in two distinct arguments, according to which the realization of these two intrinsic values require limitarian principles and policies in our non-ideal world.¹³ In the following, I assess these two arguments in turn.

A. The Argument from Political Equality

According to the first argument, limitarianism is necessary in order to secure political equality because "great inequalities in income and wealth undermine the value of democracy and the ideal of political equality in particular."¹⁴ Referring to Christiano, Robeyns mentions various mechanisms through which money can be turned into political power. These include vote buying, gatekeeping, influencing of opinion, and money as an independent political power.¹⁵ On Robeyns's view,

[t]he democratic argument for limitarianism can easily be derived from the mechanisms that Christiano outlines: Because rich people have surplus money, they are both very able and seemingly very likely to use that money to acquire political influence and power.¹⁶

12 Ibid., p. 3. It is ambiguous to say that a principle is instrumentally valuable. If political equality is intrinsically valuable, and limitarianism is instrumentally valuable in virtue of realizing it, we may ask where exactly the instrumental value resides. Is it in the limitarian *principle*, in the limitarian *policies* inspired by the principle, or perhaps in the limitarian-like *states of affairs* that result from the policies? Presumably, at least the limitarian-like states of affairs that actually realize political equality are instrumentally valuable. If so, the limitarian policies that realize those states of affairs are also most likely instrumentally valuable. Perhaps the principle *as such* may be instrumentally valuable too, in that it inspires the policies that inspires the states of affairs that realize political equality. On my reading of Robeyns, however, it is the *policies* that are singled out as instrumentally valuable. This is reasonable, and in line with ordinary usage. This does not, of course, rule out that the principle itself, or the ensuing states of affairs, can be instrumentally valuable as well. I am grateful to Jakob Elster and Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen for helpful comments on this issue.

13 Robeyns defines the limitarian threshold as maximal flourishing without reference to political equality or urgent needs. This limit, moreover, cannot meaningfully be derived from these two other values. Thus, maximal flourishing appears to be an intrinsic sufficientarian value with an upper threshold. Even though I discuss intrinsic versions of limitarianism in the next section, I leave the present issue aside in that context, precisely because it appears that the operative value is sufficientarian rather than limitarian.

14 Robeyns 2017, 6.

15 Ibid., 6; Christiano 2012.

16 Robeyns, 2017, 6.

One might think that legislation and other institutional measures could secure democratic equality, but Robeyns holds that even though such measures are necessary, they will not be sufficient, because

much of the political influence of rich people escapes the workings of formal institutions ... Large inequalities in income, and the possession of surplus money in particular, will thus always undermine political equality.¹⁷

In this quote, Robeyns mentions both inequality and surplus money as challenges for political equality.¹⁸ But it is not clear why *surplus money* should be a problem. Suppose everyone was equally super-rich. Or, suppose everyone was equally wealthy and just slightly above the limitarian threshold. The surplus wealth in these scenarios does not appear to threaten political equality at all. Of course, both cases might be seen as ideal, and thus fall outside the scope of Robeyns's theory. Consider instead a non-ideal (though stylized) world in which 10 percent of the population is (equally) super-rich, and the remaining 90 percent lack surplus money altogether. It is easy to see that the inequality between the two groups can endanger political equality. However, if surplus money "in particular" is the problem, we would have reason to be almost as worried about political equality *within the group of the equally super-rich*. This does not seem plausible.¹⁹ Thus, it must be the inequality that is the root problem.

It is therefore not clear why the concern for political equality provides instrumental reasons for *limitarian* policies. Of course, limitarian policies will increase equality in our actual non-ideal and unequal world, and this will in turn most likely increase political equality. However, the same is arguably true of sufficientarian and prioritarian policies as well. And, under many circumstances, it will also be true of utilitarian policies. Thus, the goal of political equality provides no grounds for limitarian policies *in particular*, and instrumental limitarianism is thus not necessary for political equality.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

¹⁸ Inequality is also referred to elsewhere (*ibid.*, p. 6).

¹⁹ This is not to insist that surplus money, even if distributed equally, can never cause democratic problems. Perhaps vote-buying might increase, and vote-buying is in conflict with democratic values. But political equality, in particular, would not be challenged.

Instrumental limitarianism is also not sufficient for political equality, since Robeyns's limitarianism accepts differences in riches *below* the threshold.²⁰ Even if no one has surplus money, and people at the threshold (of full flourishing) thus have much less political influence than they would have had, had they been rich or super-rich, they have *more* political influence, at least potentially, than those whose most urgent needs are just barely met.

To be sure, it could be the case that none of the most well-known distributive principles, in instrumental renderings, is both necessary and sufficient to secure political equality. Even complete economic equality (at the level of full flourishing) might be compatible with *some* political inequality, just because people prioritize political influence differently, and some might even flourish *through* their political activity, whereas others might not.²¹ Thus, it is not an effective criticism to point out that limitarianism, (perhaps) like all other principles, is neither necessary nor sufficient to secure political equality.

However, as I have argued (and as Robeyns suggests at times), the core of the problem seems to be that *inequalities* of economic means (rather than surplus money as such) in the distributive sphere cause morally offensive inequalities in the political sphere.²² If so, the problem is really caused by a *discrepancy* in the holding of economic means between individuals. In light of this, the most reasonable strategy is to address the discrepancy as such. To do so, one can start at the top end, at the bottom end, *or both*. Robeyns chooses to start at the top end, without offering arguments for why we should not start at the bottom end (as prioritarrians and sufficientarians would suggest),²³ or, most plausibly, why we should not start at both ends simultaneously. In my view,

20 This is not a necessary feature of the view, but if differences below the threshold were impermissible, limitarianism would become at least as much egalitarian as limitarian, because it would then mandate equality at the level of full flourishing.

21 Volacu and Dumitru 2019, 257.

22 There can, of course, be other sources of political inequality.

23 Note that the argument from unmet urgent needs (see below) is motivated by the bottom end of the distribution. But the argument from political equality is presented as independently valid. As quoted above, “[t]he democratic argument for limitarianism *can easily be derived* from the mechanisms that Christiano outlines”; Robeyns 2017, p. 6 (emphasis added). Also, the argument from political equality is presented without reference to the urgent needs argument, and does not seem to depend on it (and vice versa).

instrumental egalitarianism (of money or financial resources) is *clearly* the most plausible principle given the problem at hand.

To illustrate, suppose the limit for full flourishing is at 10, and that A has 5, and B has 15.²⁴ Limitarianism advocates against supra-limit holdings and implies that the distribution should be A:5 and B:10. This is not to suggest, uncharitably, that limitarianism is incompatible with further distribution below the threshold. The point is just that the theory emphasizes one particular end of the distribution, namely the “upper tail,” which in this case refers to B’s 5 surplus units. If those units are gone, limitarianism has no further implications. (Depending on the extent to which one emphasizes the sufficientarian aspect of the theory).

Something similar can be said about (instrumental) sufficientarianism. Suppose the threshold is at 10 and that there are 5 unowned available units. These units can be given to A, so that A gets 10, and B remains at 15. Sufficientarianism in itself has no further implications (though this view, too, is compatible with further distribution, once sufficiency is secured). Thus, sufficientarianism starts at the bottom end, and limitarianism starts at the top end. But limitarianism allows sub-threshold inequalities, and sufficientarianism allows supra-threshold inequalities.

Egalitarianism, on the other hand, straightforwardly suggests a *redistribution* of 5 units from B to A, such that they both end up having 10. Again, if, as seems plausible, the *inequality* is the root of the problem, presenting limitarianism (or sufficientarianism for that matter) as the solution misses the mark. This is so even if limitarianism (and sufficientarianism) will admittedly *reduce* the problem. The reason is that there is an available alternative, egalitarianism, that is superior, and which will reduce the problem to a greater extent, at least under a very wide range of circumstances.²⁵

24 This example does not differentiate between metric and distribuendum. I just assume that A and B are equally effective converters of wealth into flourishing, and that both will flourish maximally at 10, less than maximally at 5, and more than maximally at 15.

25 Any discussion of the instrumental value of different principles will be speculative to some extent. There could be some peculiar circumstances under which limitarian (or sufficientarian) policies will yield better results, in terms of political equality, than any other principles. However, given the level of abstraction and generality of Robeyns’s arguments, equality seems obviously superior to limitarianism.

There is also a more general problem with the argument from political equality. We can assume that the world is either such that there are enough resources to allow everyone to flourish fully, or such that there are not enough resources to allow everyone to flourish fully.²⁶ Consider the first possibility (which limitarians may reject as an ideal scenario). If there are any surplus riches left once everyone has reached the threshold of full flourishing, limitarianism could either distribute them equally, thus rendering the view egalitarian rather than limitarian, and the argument from political equality redundant, or it could demand the destruction of surplus riches, rendering the view wasteful and implausible.

On the other hand, if there are not enough resources in the world to let everyone flourish fully (which might be more in line with the non-ideal assumption), it seems to follow from Robeyns's flourishing account that all surplus riches should be spent, in some sufficientarian fashion, to maximize either the incidence or extent of full flourishing.²⁷ Political equality would not play any significant role in this scenario.

Thus, if there are enough resources to let everyone flourish, limitarianism is either implausibly wasteful, or indistinguishable from egalitarianism. If there are not enough resources to let everyone flourish, limitarianism seems indistinguishable from sufficientarianism. The argument from political equality can only play a distinct role, then, if it implies wasting resources in circumstances of plenty. But this is arguably not a very plausible result (and most likely outside the non-ideal scope of limitarianism).

Overall, I do not see how the value of political equality provides support for instrumental limitarianism in particular. Limitarianism is neither necessary nor sufficient for securing political equality, but, more importantly, limitarianism does not appear to be the instrumental distributive principle that is best suited to secure this important value. Rather, some form of instrumental egalitarianism (of money

26 Leaving aside for the moment the possibility that there are exactly enough resources to let everyone flourish maximally and equally.

27 See note 13 above. If we take into account urgent needs, this would be a lower threshold with higher priority, but would not alter the basic sufficientarian logic; Huseby 2010.

or resources) is the superior alternative.²⁸ In addition, it is hard to see what role political equality could play, in non-ideal circumstances of (moderate) scarcity.

B. The Argument from Unmet Urgent Needs

What about the value of meeting urgent needs? As noted, the limitarian threshold, on Robeyns's view, is located at the level of full flourishing. Once this level is reached, further money or wealth will not, by definition, contribute to further flourishing. (Though it can contribute to increased welfare, capabilities, and forms of flourishing that do not accord with Robeyns's moralized understanding of the term).

The argument from unmet needs claims that since surplus money does not contribute to people's flourishing, it has zero moral weight, and it would be unreasonable to reject the principle that we ought to use that money to meet those urgent unmet needs.²⁹

The level at which urgent needs are met, moreover, is significantly lower than the level of full flourishing. Thus, limitarianism (in this version) is a layered view, with two thresholds, one lower and one higher.

Since meeting urgent needs is intrinsically important, and since surplus money or wealth above full flourishing has zero value, it follows that those whose urgent needs are not met must have absolute priority over those who have surplus money. Thus, those who are flourishing fully, with money to spare, should give up their surplus to meet others' urgent needs. This is, as far as I can see, a version of (two-level) intrinsic sufficientarianism.³⁰

Is instrumental limitarianism the way to go if we want to secure that urgent needs are met? There are some reasons to doubt this. First, the moral impermissibility of having too much cannot in general be defended by reference to the importance of meeting urgent needs. Assume that there is a number of people whose urgent needs are currently unmet, but whose urgent needs could be met, given sufficient financial resources. Suppose also that there is a number of people who have surplus wealth.

28 For a different criticism of the argument from political equality, see Volacu and Dimitru 2019. See also Timmer 2019.

29 Robeyns 2017, 12. See also Timmer 2021.

30 See Volacu and Dumitru 2019, 258–9.

Call the amount of resources needed to meet the urgent needs X , and the amount of surplus money held by the flourishing Y .

The argument from unmet urgent needs does not imply that it is impermissible to be rich if $Y > X$. It only implies that it is intrinsically important that urgent needs are met, and that goods above the limitarian level have zero value. One could argue that in our non-ideal world, it is in fact the case that $Y < X$, but that is quite a bold empirical claim, given the amount of currently available resources.³¹ According to the argument from unmet urgent needs, then, it is perfectly permissible to be rich so long as all urgent needs are met ($Y > X$). Thus, this argument for limitarianism does not work.

One response could be that if $Y < X$, then it is, in effect, impermissible to be rich. But this is merely a coincidence. If, in a given situation, an equal level amounts to a level at or below the limitarian threshold, egalitarianism has limitarian-like implications. It would then be, in effect, impermissible to have wealth above the threshold, because that would necessarily imply inequality. Again, that is just coincidental, and arguably not a theoretically interesting aspect of egalitarianism. The same is true if, in a given situation, sufficientarian, prioritarian, or utilitarian distributions just happen to lead to outcomes in which no one is above the limit. In these cases, each of the principles would imply that it is impermissible to be rich, but here too, the implication would just be the coincidental upshot of the various principles applied to specific circumstances.³²

Further, if it is intrinsically valuable that people's urgent needs are met (which is plausible), and if we want to consider what policies would help realize this value, limitarianism does not strike me as very promising. Instrumental sufficientarianism is more reasonable, since such a view focuses squarely on bringing the deprived up to the relevant threshold rather than (primarily) bringing the rich down to the (limitarian) threshold. Instrumental prioritarianism or egalitarianism also appear better suited to tackle the problem, since the first explicitly

31 Some researchers, at least, claim that there are enough resources in the world to feed up to 10 billion people; Foley 2011.

32 Also, the amount of financial resources in the world is not absolute. It could be the case that the existence of some super-rich individuals positively affects the flourishing of the deprived, by way of example or inspiration. I am grateful to Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen for helpful comments on this issue.

prioritizes the worst off, and the second (as noted) is equally concerned with both tails of the distribution. Even instrumental utilitarianism (if there is such a thing) would be more appropriate, given some plausible assumptions about diminishing marginal utility.

Thus, neither of Robeyns's arguments succeed qua arguments for instrumental limitarianism. Again, this does not imply that her view is implausible. Both political equality and securing a basic minimum are important moral goals. But since I am here interested in how promising limitarianism is as a principle of distributive justice, it is noteworthy that the most elaborate available account of instrumental limitarianism does not really have limitarian implications at all.

3. Intrinsic Limitarianism

On Robeyns's definition, "[I]ntrinsic limitarianism is the view that being rich is intrinsically bad, whereas according to *non-intrinsic limitarianism*, riches are morally non-permissible for a reason that refers to some other value."³³ As noted, she refrains from defending intrinsic limitarianism, but she does mention some possible versions, based on virtue, perfectionism, or paternalism. It seems, however, that the prospects for intrinsic limitarianism are quite dim.

A. Paternalism, and so on

Paternalism means interfering with other people's autonomy without their consent, for their own good.³⁴ In the case of limitarianism, paternalism would presumably mean that some agent, perhaps the state, prevents people from having wealth above the limit, for their own good. If so, excess wealth must be bad for people (something that is suggested by Robeyns and defended by Zwarthoed).³⁵ However, if having riches above the level of full flourishing is bad for people, and *this* is the reason why paternalistic measures are necessary, then paternalism is merely instrumental. There must then be some *other* intrinsic value that paternalism is supposed to protect or promote—such as, for instance,

33 Robeyns 2017, 5 (emphases in original).

34 Dworkin 2020.

35 Robeyns 2017, 5; Zwarthoed 2019.

welfare (which is one way of understanding “being bad for people”), virtue, autonomy, or some perfectionist value. But then it is one of these ideals that are doing the job, rather than paternalism.

What about the other suggestions? Perhaps having too much can undermine the possibility of realizing certain virtues, or make it hard to achieve other valuable ideals. Moderation, for instance, can be hard to realize in conditions of excess and luxury. More generally, there could be several virtues that are incompatible with excess, and several perfectionist values that are hard to bring about in luxurious circumstances. This does not mean, of course, that any of the possible virtues or perfectionist values are plausible, but at least they could be. However, as was the case with paternalism, there is a more fundamental problem. Even if some of these values can ground a view of justice that sets an upper limit to the level of goods that people can permissibly have, this will not amount to intrinsic forms of *limitarianism*. The limit would be *instrumental* in *bringing about* (the conditions for) virtue, autonomy, perfectionist values, or any other non-limitarian value, just as Robeyns’s own view is (allegedly) instrumental in bringing about the meeting of urgent needs and political equality.

This notwithstanding, there might still be intrinsic values that are *themselves* such that it is important not to have too much of it, and virtue might be one place to look. Courage, for instance, is a virtue that is best had in optimal amounts. I will not deny the possibility that such values may exist, and that they may exhibit limitarian features.³⁶ Even so, such values are quite different from the forms of limitarianism that are under consideration here, which focus on distributive justice. Again, on Robeyns’s view, intrinsic limitarianism is the view that “being rich is intrinsically bad”³⁷ and not the view that there are some intrinsic values that are best had in moderation. Thus, values with limitarian-like features are not likely to play a significant role in discussions about distributive justice.

36 This is merely an illustration, and not a claim about how virtues are generally understood. On Aristotle’s view, virtues represent the median point between two extremes. Courage, for instance, is the median point between cowardice and foolhardiness; Kraut 2018. In limitarian terms, such virtues would be values whose limit worked both ways, as a maximum, and as a minimum. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this question, and to Hallvard Fossheim for helpful comments.

37 Robeyns 2017, 5.

B. The Badness of Having Too Much

What, then, could intrinsic limitarianism be? Consider for illustration intrinsic egalitarianism. On this view, it matters in itself, that people are equally well off in some relevant respect.³⁸ Intrinsic sufficientarianism, on the other hand, holds that it matters in itself that people are sufficiently well off.³⁹ Intrinsic limitarianism would correspondingly be the view that it matters in itself that people are not better off, in some relevant respect, than some upper limit.⁴⁰

There are two versions of this possibility. The *person-affecting* version holds that it is (intrinsically) bad *for* people to have too much money (or welfare, or some other metric). The *non-person-affecting* version holds that it is (intrinsically) bad if people have too much money (or welfare, or some other metric), irrespective of whether this is (also) bad *for* them.

Consider first the person-affecting version. On this view, having too much is *bad for people*, and it is bad intrinsically, in much the same way that it can be bad for people, and intrinsically so, to have too little. Here it is worth keeping in mind that the metric might play a role. Suppose the metric is welfare. It is very hard to see that it could be bad *for you*, and intrinsically so, to have more welfare. To have more welfare is conceptually very close to something being *good* for you, and possibly intrinsically so. Quite similarly, it is hard to see that having more, or better, capabilities, can be bad *for you*, and intrinsically so.

On the other hand, it is plausible that it could *sometimes* be bad for people to have too much money or wealth (and that this may be intrinsically bad). But there are some worries to consider. First, this is likely to be contextual. It is hard to believe that there is some set limit above which more money or wealth will make people's lives go worse in some relevant respect, regardless of who these people are, what psychological traits they have, how the distribution is elsewhere in society, where and when they happen to live, and so on. But perhaps this problem could be solved by defining the limit *in light of* such variation, such that it is bad for a person to have so much money or resources that it is in fact bad for her *given* her circumstances and individual traits.

38 Parfit 1997; Temkin 2003.

39 Crisp 2003; Huseby 2010.

40 Robeyns 2017, 5.

There are more important problems with the suggestion, however. If having too much is bad for people, what they have too much of, and what they get less of, must refer to two different things, for instance wealth and welfare.⁴¹ It is coherent under some circumstances to say that if you get more of X you get less of Y. But if someone suggested that the more you get of X, the less you (simultaneously) get of X, we would be hard pressed to understand the proposition. Because of this, it is difficult to see that it can be *intrinsically* bad to have too much. What is intrinsically bad must be that people are getting *worse off* in some respect. And they cannot become worse off in that respect by becoming better off in the same respect! If they are getting worse off because they have too much money, on the other hand, that just means that money beyond some threshold is *instrumentally* bad because it makes people's lives go worse. The intrinsic value must be that people do not fall below some level of, for instance, welfare or flourishing. This suggests, again, sufficientarianism, rather than limitarianism.

Third, even if having too much was intrinsically bad for people (which I, as indicated, doubt), this would not (at least yet) give us sufficient reason to conclude that it is *morally impermissible* to have too much.⁴² The distance from the badness to the impermissibility must be covered by a plausible paternalistic argumentative path. Perhaps such arguments could be provided, but it does not seem likely.

What about the non-person-affecting version? On this view, it is in itself bad if people have too much, regardless of whether this is (also) bad for them. This too comes across as an unlikely suggestion. Suppose there are three possible future versions of the world, and that the limitarian threshold is at 10. In the first possible version, everyone is far below the limit, at 4. In the second, everyone is just below the limit, at 9. In the third, everyone is just above the limit, at 11. Intrinsic limitarians would say that, *at least in one respect*, the last world is the worst of the three. That is, the world in which everyone is best off, and equally so, is worse than a world in which everyone is much worse off, and equally so. It might be worthwhile to consider these cases with different currencies of justice in mind. But regardless of whether we assume that it is resources, welfare, capabilities, or something else that

41 Or resources and capabilities. Or something else.

42 See Robeyns 2017, 4.

should be distributed, intrinsic non-person affecting limitarianism seems very implausible.⁴³

What is lacking is some convincing rationale for why the limit is where it is (in the example above, the limit is, of course, randomly set), and why it is intrinsically important that people do not have too much. None of this suffices to rule out conclusively the possibility that some plausible version of intrinsic limitarianism could be developed, but I, for one, am not holding my breath.

4. Instrumental Limitarianism More Generally

So far, I have argued that Robeyns's instrumental limitarianism is not really limitarian, and that intrinsic limitarianism, (quite) generally, holds little promise. This leaves ample room for other forms of instrumental limitarianism. One suggestion has, as noted, been offered by Zwarthoed. On her view, personal autonomy can be undermined by having too much money and financial resources. Thus, if we value autonomy intrinsically, and if it is right that autonomy can be thwarted by having too much, then we have a reason to set an upper limit to how much money or wealth people can have.

However, while having too much might undermine *some* people's autonomy, this hardly generalizes.⁴⁴ More importantly, autonomy generally requires *sufficiency* of at least resources. People who lack basic necessities will have a very hard time making autonomous decisions, whereas many who have too much are very able to take charge of their own lives. Thus, autonomy robustly requires sufficiency, and only contingently requires limitarianism. It would be difficult, in my view, to justify a general policy of limitarianism with reference to autonomy. It would also be difficult to show how the autonomy-based view could justify the *impermissibility* of having too much.

43 This example includes at least one ideal scenario (in which everyone is above the limit), but this should not be a problem insofar as I am here discussing possible intrinsic versions of limitarianism, and not Robeyns's specifically (instrumental and) non-ideal account. Note that Timmer (2021) has recently claimed (plausibly) that ideal forms of limitarianism seem hard to defend (see also Robeyns 2017, 37). The questions of ideal and intrinsic limitarianism are, however, distinct.

44 Zwarthoed 2018, 1183.

Robeyns also mentions several other possible forms of limitarian-inspired policies and institutions, including emissions quotas, quotas for how many children one can have, and capability ceilings defined in terms of one's actions' negative impact on others.⁴⁵ In my view, the two first are more plausibly understood as examples of equal distribution of shares, and the last as an implementation of a version of the no-harm principle. If we think something should be distributed equally, everyone's share is limited, of course, but this does not mean that the distribution is therefore limitarian. And if I am not allowed to harm you, there are some limits to what I can do. Even so, the no-harm principle is not limitarian in a relevant sense.

Further, as has been emphasized throughout, any form of *instrumental* limitarianism will necessarily have to rely on some *intrinsic* value. And that intrinsic value is unlikely to be of a limitarian variety, for reasons spelled out in the preceding section. Thus, limitarianism must be a means to an end. Robeyns's view is based on equality and sufficiency, and Zwarthoed's view is based on autonomy. One could imagine versions based on prioritarianism, virtue, or some perfectionist value. The problem is that it can be seen as a *distraction* to present a view as a novel principle of distributive justice,⁴⁶ if this principle is in fact just an empirically contingent way of securing some further, and more familiar intrinsic principle. In other words, it is not helpful to present it as a principle alongside a set of other principles, of which there are (presumably) plausible intrinsic versions.

In addition, it is not easy to think of a plausible intrinsic value that is best promoted only by setting an upper threshold to how much people can permissibly have. In the case of political equality, urgent needs, and autonomy, as I have argued, it is at least as important to make sure that people either have equally much or that they reach some threshold (whether or not that coincides with the limitarian threshold). Again, the need for instrumental egalitarianism, sufficientarianism or perhaps prioritarianism will be *at least* as great as the need for instrumental limitarianism.

Moreover, as indicated above, it is hard to see how one can ground the claim that it is *impermissible* to have too much.⁴⁷ To be sure, in light

45 Robeyns 2017, 4.

46 Ibid., 1–4.

47 Ibid.

of many principles, it may under some circumstances happen to be impermissible to have too much, given the prevailing distribution. But limitarianism holds that it is impermissible to have too much *without* reference to the prevailing distribution,⁴⁸ and without reference to the intrinsic value that limitarianism is supposed to be instrumental in realizing. Admittedly, Robeyns defines instrumental limitarianism like this: “according to non-intrinsic limitarianism, riches are morally non-permissible for a reason that refers to some other value.”⁴⁹ So it might be wrong to say that instrumental limitarianism claims that it is impermissible to have too much without reference to some other intrinsic value. In other places, however, it sounds as if this is exactly the case: “In a nutshell, limitarianism advocates that it is not morally permissible to have more resources than are needed to fully flourish in life.”⁵⁰

In any case, there is some tension here. If limitarianism is defined without reference to other values, it is hard to justify the impermissibility claim. Why should it just be impermissible to have too much in our non-ideal world? But if limitarianism is defined with reference to other values, it immediately looks more like a sufficientarian claim. It then says that it is important that people reach some morally relevant threshold—for instance the threshold of full flourishing—and resources beyond that point have zero value. Resources of zero value can be used to realize ideals that have more than zero moral value (meeting urgent needs, say). It is then impermissible to have surplus money whenever there is some more morally worthy cause that the surplus could be used to promote, otherwise not. But this is just what sufficientarianism says (in many versions). Like all sufficientarian views that accept an upper (negative) threshold, it implies that all supra-threshold holdings can be used for other, more weighty distributive goals, such as providing for those who are below the threshold.⁵¹ The impermissibility claim is just the implication of this view when applied under a certain range of empirical conditions.

To sum up, any instrumental form of limitarianism is valuable in virtue of some intrinsic value. If so, referring to a distributive principle as “limitarian” is not very helpful, if the relevant limitarianism is

48 See, however, Timmer 2021.

49 Robeyns 2017, 5.

50 *Ibid.*, 1. See also Timmer 2021, 2.

51 Crisp 2003; Huseby 2010, 2020.

instrumental in bringing about, say, egalitarianism, prioritarianism, utilitarianism, sufficientarianism, virtue, autonomy or some perfectionist value. To be sure, instrumental limitarianism could in principle be valuable in virtue of bringing about some form of intrinsic limitarianism, but, as we have seen, it is doubtful that any form of intrinsic limitarianism is plausible. Further, none of the forms of instrumental limitarianism suggested so far, seems convincing, since the intrinsic values on which they rely appear to be better promoted by *other instrumental principles*. This latter conclusion, of course, applies only to the few views examined, and not to all possible forms of instrumental limitarianism. Even so, the assessment so far provides good reason to doubt that limitarianism has much to add to debates about distributive justice.

5. Limited Forms of Limitarianism

So far I have examined limitarianism as a principle of distributive justice. In doing so, I have taken limitarianism to be a contender with familiar principles and theories such as egalitarianism, prioritarianism, sufficientarianism, and utilitarianism. In my view, this is also the spirit in which (instrumental and non-ideal) limitarianism is presented and defended by Robeyns.⁵² However, even if my criticisms so far hit the target, it could still be the case that there is room for more limited limitarian principles, perhaps principles that can justify specific policies. Or it could be the case that limitarianism is politically useful in ways the more traditional principles are not.

Dick Timmer has recently defended limitarianism along the former lines.⁵³ He proposes that limitarianism can be defended as a presumption that specifies what a just distribution requires under “epistemic constraints.”⁵⁴ There are three arguments for this view. According to the first, “the limitarian presumption can be derived from the egalitarian presumption.”⁵⁵ According to the egalitarian presumption, if we are to

52 Robeyns 2017, 1–3. See, however, Robeyns 2022.

53 I have also had similar suggestions from several commentators.

54 Timmer 2021, 760. Timmer also defends limitarianism as a mid-level principle that can bridge fundamental normative theories and the specific circumstances characterizing the status quo; *ibid.*, 763–5. I do not discuss that proposition here, because it seems to me to be very similar to what Robeyns refers to as instrumental limitarianism, which I have discussed above.

55 *Ibid.* 766.

distribute goods between individuals in light of some moral principle, such as desert (which is the example Timmer mostly relies on), and we do not know who is more deserving, we should distribute the goods equally, because this reduces our chances of increasing injustice.⁵⁶ In Timmer's case (based on an example presented by Juha Räikkä),⁵⁷ an employer is supposed to allocate 4 units of goods to two workers on the basis of desert. As it happens, the employer lacks information about the workers' individual contribution to the job. According to the egalitarian presumption, the best way to proceed is to divide the units equally. If both workers receive 2 units, the worst mistake that can be made is that one of them is underpaid 2 units and one is overpaid 2 units. Since the principle to be realized is a desert principle, both underpaying and overpaying are a mistake. If the employer distributes 3 units to one worker and 1 unit to the other, the worst possible mistake is that one worker is overpaid by 3, and the other is underpaid by 3 (and even worse for a 4/0 distribution).⁵⁸ Thus, in this situation, we should distribute equally if we want to distribute in light of desert, because this will minimize the extent of injustice that we may (inadvertently) cause.

The egalitarian presumption, Timmer claims, "supports presumptive limitarianism by implication. Presumptive limitarianism is likely to reduce or at least constrain objectionable inequality by setting an upper threshold to how much wealth people can have."⁵⁹ I am not sure, however, that this is the case. In Timmer's example, the limitarian threshold is set at 3 units. If 4 units is all that is up for distribution, and 4 is too much, then no one should receive more than 3. Both the egalitarian and the limitarian presumption agree that a 3/1 distribution is preferable to a 4/0 distribution. But they disagree in that the limitarian presumption allows a 3/1 distribution, whereas the egalitarian presumption does not. Thus, it is not correct that the egalitarian presumption implies the limitarian presumption.

Moreover, let us consider contexts that take initial holdings into account. This aspect is not present in Räikkä's original example, and it is easy to see why. If we want to pay workers for a particular job on the basis

56 This also effectively removes any chance of reducing injustice, but many will agree that it is worse to increase injustice than not to reduce it.

57 Räikkä 2019.

58 *Ibid.*, 815.

59 Timmer 2021, 766–7.

of desert in that particular situation, we do not need information about how well off they are initially. To be sure, their initial holdings may, for all we know, be unfair, but we can assume that information on this score is even more inaccessible than information about their relative merits in completing the job. Suppose there are still 4 units to be distributed, that the limitarian threshold is at 10, and that worker A is currently at 6 and worker B is currently at 10. The egalitarian presumption implies that the workers should still get 2 units each, so long as information about their relative (general and specific) desert is lacking, resulting in an 8/12 distribution. The limitarian presumption, of course, would have us give 4 units to A and 0 to B, resulting in a 10/10 distribution. Thus, the egalitarian presumption does not imply the limitarian presumption. The egalitarian presumption, at least in the case under scrutiny, in which desert is the fundamental principle of justice, is insensitive to initial holdings, while the limitarian presumption is very sensitive to initial holdings, and would be inexplicable if not.⁶⁰

There is also a more general worry. According to the limitarian presumption, “without substantive reasons to the contrary, we have reasons to regard a distribution as unjust if some people’s wealth exceeds the limitarian threshold.”⁶¹ In my view, 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.

The second argument says that if one accepts the limitarian claim that there is a threshold of wealth above which wealth has zero moral value (or at least little value), then one should accept the limitarian presumption. Thus, one should prefer distributions in which no one has surplus wealth⁶² (at least in situations in which the total amount of wealth or goods are the same). In my view, this only holds on the assumption that sub-threshold wealth or goods are morally valuable,

60 It would be too much of a digression to examine the relationship between the egalitarian and limitarian presumptions when other fundamental moral principles are assumed. The point here is just to show that the first does not in general imply the second.

61 Timmer 2021, 6.

62 *Ibid.*, 8–9.

or at least more valuable than wealth or goods above the threshold. If so, the “limitarian claim” is (again), really a sufficientarian claim. And sufficientarians would prefer distributions with as much sufficiency as possible; whenever some individuals have more than the threshold, their excess wealth should be distributed to those who are below the threshold. To say that this is a limitarian presumption, rather than a sufficientarian one, does not seem right, for reasons presented above.

“The third argument for presumptive limitarianism is that decision-makers often lack the epistemic grounds to apply substantive principles for distributing wealth fairly.”⁶³ Timmer goes on to suggest that political equality and meeting urgent needs are both substantial requirements of justice, and not plagued by such epistemic uncertainty.⁶⁴ Moreover,

according to the limitarian presumption, what we do know is that a distribution between Adam and Eve in which neither of them 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.⁶⁵

This seems to me to repeat the main strands of the instrumental arguments for limitarianism, and the reply is that a limitarian presumption just seems much less useful than an egalitarian presumption, and somewhat less useful than a sufficientarian presumption. This is true even though presumptions are supposed to “specify risk-averse principles that aim to minimize the harm of possible misallocations of valuable goods in the light of epistemic uncertainty.”⁶⁶ 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.

There is, however, yet another way in which limitarianism could play a role in distributive justice. According to Robeyns, normative analysis of the rich “would make it possible for philosophers to have greater impact on existing debates in society.”⁶⁷ The reason is that many political parties and movements (and economists) are preoccupied with the wealth of the very rich and the super-rich.

63 *Ibid.*, 9.

64 Theories that rely on desert or responsibility, on the other hand, have such epistemic problems in spades; *ibid.*, 10.

65 *Ibid.*

66 *Ibid.*, 11.

67 Robeyns 2017, 2.

Two points in response. First, as I am sure Robeyns would agree, impact as such is a rather empty goal, and the extent to which limitarianism can be *valuable* in this particular sense, relies on the extent to which limitarianism can be theoretically and morally justified. As should be clear by now, I am not optimistic on that score. Second, if the quoted claim is true, that would presumably hold for *all* analyses of the upper tail of the distribution, including criticisms of limitarianism, and not only those that defend some form of limitarianism. Thus, this provides no particular reason to think that limitarianism qua distributive principle, is particularly helpful in this regard.

6. Conclusion

Overall, it appears that there is very limited need for a limitarian principle of justice. Robeyns's instrumental limitarianism, which is the version of the view that is currently worked out in most detail, is not really limitarian, even though it may have some limitarian implications under some circumstances. More generally, it is difficult to imagine a plausible version of intrinsic limitarianism, since it would be hard to explain why it should be morally impermissible, as such, to have more than some limit.

Further, other possible versions of instrumental limitarianism, such as Zwarthoed's, seem, like Robeyns's urgent needs account, to be more sufficientarian than limitarian. Clearly, there can be many other versions, but we do not have much reason to embrace instrumental limitarianism until we see at least one such account that is convincingly limitarian, and not sufficientarian or egalitarian. In addition, any instrumental forms of limitarianism must be based on some intrinsic value that is not limitarianism (given that intrinsic forms of limitarianism are implausible).

Lastly, I have argued that there is little reason to think that limitarianism is particularly helpful either as a presumption or as a principle providing philosophers with more impact in public debates. None of this is meant to rule out that some plausible limitarian theory could be defended, or that limitarianism could constitute a part of an overall hybrid account,⁶⁸ but the evidence so far suggests that

68 See Robeyns (2022) for interesting suggestions along such lines.

limitarianism is of very limited use in discussion about distributive justice.

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7. Why Limitarianism?

Ingrid Robeyns

This article discusses ‘limitarianism’, which in its most general formulation is the idea that in the world as it is, no one should have more than a certain upper limit of valuable goods, in particular, income and wealth. What, if anything, does ‘limitarianism’ add to normative political philosophy?

In Section 1, I describe the context in which limitarianism has been introduced. Section 2 will provide a more detailed statement about limitarianism, including some more recent contributions to and developments in the literature. In the next two sections, I discuss egalitarianism (Section 3) and sufficientarianism (Section 4) and ask whether they can do what I envision to be the task of limitarianism. Section 5 argues that within theories of distributive justice, limitarianism is best seen as part of a pluralist account. This is illustrated by sketching the proposal of a pluralist account combining sufficientarianism, opportunity egalitarianism, and limitarianism. Section 6 concludes by pulling everything together, and will give an answer to the question of what limitarianism contributes to normative political philosophy.¹

1 For reasons of space and focus, I do not discuss in this article other worries related to limitarianism. For example, limitarianism is subject to criticisms that are levied against all threshold views; see Timmer 2021a. I will also not engage with Huseby’s (2022) critique of limitarianism that refers specifically to arguments made by Timmer (2021b).

1. The Context of Limitarianism

In ‘*Having Too Much*’, I introduced limitarianism, which in its most general formulation is the idea that in the world as it is, as well as in the most nearby possible worlds, no-one should have more than an upper threshold of valuable goods.² These valuable goods could be various types of scarce goods, and their distribution could be a concern at the macro or micro level. In this article, my focus will be on personal holdings of money—*income and wealth in particular*.

Much of the writing on material inequalities focuses on the position of the worst off, and makes a distinction between the poor or disadvantaged and those who are not poor. Economic limitarianism changes that two-tiered categorization into a three-tiered distinction between (1) those who are poor or deprived; (2) those who are not poor, but also not very rich; and (3) those who are very rich. This reflects the material basis of the classic distinction in sociology between the working class, the middle class, and the upper class. Making such a three-layered distinction makes it possible to analyse what we owe to persons in each of those three groups, and also what persons in those groups owe to others, in a way that a distinction between only the poor and the non-poor doesn’t allow us to do. In particular, since limitarianism holds that, in the present and nearby possible worlds, holding large concentrations of wealth has no overall beneficial effects, we should morally prefer limitarianism to a situation in which some have too much.³ The beneficial effects of this shift could be various, including contributing to meeting the urgent needs of others, addressing collective action problems such as the funding of effective action for climate change, or protecting democratic values.⁴

2 Robeyns 2017.

3 One might object that there are agents who could do more good with excess money than the state, in which case they should keep it. However, since limitarianism is about personal wealth that one keeps, and not about the wealth one has transferred to a charity or company which might be able to do that good, it rules out this option. However, this raises questions about how limitarianism would draw a clear line between personal wealth and wealth someone has as part of an organization or company, which I will have to take up in future work. I thank Robert Huseby for pressing this objection.

4 It follows that limitarianism does not support transitions to states of affairs in which all excess money is eliminated without such transitions having beneficial effects. The excess money in itself is not the problem and should therefore in itself not be

For political philosophers engaged in interdisciplinary research on inequalities and distributive justice, the shift in focus to the upper tail of income and wealth distribution shouldn't be surprising. Economists have been documenting rising economic inequalities, in particular the strong concentration of wealth among the rich, for some time now.⁵ These data show that inequality is rising in almost all countries, because the very rich are getting even richer. Limitarianism as an idea is a contribution to the debate that there is something wrong with not just inequality in general, but with wealth concentration in particular. Limitarians believe that this can best be captured by introducing the idea of limitarianism *separately*, rather than understanding what is wrong with a rising concentration of wealth under the broader banner of egalitarianism.⁶ In that respect, it involves a symmetrical move from a concern with the elimination of poverty, which, *ceteris paribus*, would also reduce inequality. For the elimination of poverty too, specific reasons have been given that are not all reducible to egalitarian concerns.⁷

One aspect of the discussion on limitarianism is the question of what kind of theorizing it exemplifies. Limitarianism has been proposed for 'the world as it is'.⁸ In the world as it is, there is hunger, destitution, and disadvantage; many people are unable to flourish; there are major collective action problems that require our collective attention, or collective goods that are endangered (first and foremost biodiversity and a stable climate); and large holdings of wealth allow their possessors to disproportionately influence politics and policy-making, to engage in forms of consumption that are highly polluting, and, in some countries, even to buy citizenship.⁹

I have proposed limitarianism for the present and nearby possible worlds, in which such injustices and instances of ill-being occur. Suppose we lived in a different world, in which there are no societal

eliminated; it is not a bad like poison or pollution. Rather, the excess money is either harmful (e.g. because of its effects on democracy) or its possession by the super-rich is wasteful, and therefore its reallocation would make the state of affairs better.

5 See, e.g., Atkinson and Piketty 2007; Alvaredo et al. 2013; Piketty 2014.

6 Neuhäuser (2018) and Axelsen and Nielsen (2021) give a range of arguments about why extreme wealth is problematic, including in ways that cannot be captured by the reasons standardly given for worrying merely about economic inequality.

7 E.g. Herlitz 2019.

8 Robeyns 2017, p. 3.

9 For example, Deutsche Welle reported that, in 2013, Malta sold passports for 650,000 euros; see <https://www.dw.com/en/european-citizenship-sold-to-the-super-wealthy/a-16756198>.

harms, everyone is fully flourishing, there are no injustices or cases of ill-being that can be addressed by human intervention, and concentrations of money can no longer enable corruption or the buying of political influence. In that blissful world, limitarianism would not demand any redistribution of resources.¹⁰ Similarly, limitarianism (as I proposed it) does not apply to people living in worlds that are not connected. What matters is the distribution of wealth in comparison with others in the here and now; it is a comparative notion. The other thing that matters is that people are in some way connected; it is a relational notion.¹¹ It is not the absolute level of wealth in itself that matters independent of what others have and independent of the overall state of affairs we find ourselves in. Hence, if, after a nuclear war, everyone dies except one person, who is a billionaire, limitarianism would not judge that to be an unjust situation. Limitarianism would simply not apply.¹²

Thus, limitarianism, at least as I proposed it, should be understood as a contribution to problem-driven philosophy as opposed to a contribution to theory-driven philosophy.¹³ I introduce these labels here, as I hope they are a helpful formulation for getting the relevant distinction across. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the distinction between these two broad strands in political philosophy is a long-standing one that offers different perspectives to political philosophers regarding what they take to be their primary tasks, and, derived from this, the appropriate methods they will use and the attitudes they will take to engaging with empirical work.¹⁴

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- 10 Perhaps a different form of limitarianism might apply in such a world, such as having an upper limit which is a percentage of the mean holding of wealth, or limitarianism not in monetary resources, but in some other metric of justice. These are options in need of further exploration.
 - 11 The relational aspect could be very minimal, though, such as sharing a planet on which all depend, or having a shared history. Whether a completely non-relational limitarianism is plausible is a question that falls outside the scope of this article.
 - 12 I thank Martin Peterson for raising this issue in correspondence.
 - 13 At the time at which limitarianism was introduced, I mentioned it as a contribution to non-ideal political philosophy. As I see this now, there is overlap between the theory-driven versus the problem-driven distinction on the one hand, and the ideal versus non-ideal distinction on the other. The latter can be understood in several different ways (see, e.g., Valentini 2012), of which the (functional) theory vs problem-driven distinction is only one.
 - 14 Methodological discussions that relate to various aspects of this distinction (or closely related distinctions), and what it entails for how we do philosophy, can be

Theory-driven political philosophy engages with the theoretical work of other philosophers (or one's own earlier work) and essentially refers to and engages with that body of work. Much of the literature on theories of distributive justice over the last few decades has been theory-driven political philosophy—political philosophers writing about how their view is different from another philosopher's view, or how an existing view could be improved or challenged theoretically.

Real-world-problems-driven political philosophy (*problem-driven political philosophy* for short) focuses on addressing practical problems in the world, and engages with whatever kind of analysis is needed to create useful knowledge for addressing those problems. Problem-driven political philosophy does not seek knowledge for the sake of it, but puts the contribution of philosophy to societal challenges at its centre; the goal is to help humans shape their actions and institutions in a normatively sound way, hence without sacrificing solid normative analysis to the risks of rhetoric or unjustifiably resorting to the status quo.

In theory-driven political philosophy, the concepts used would, ideally, capture distinct and well-defined phenomena and, typically, a lot of effort is devoted to developing fine-grained distinctions very precisely. Some degree of precision is also needed in problem-driven political philosophy, but the more important desideratum is an ability to contribute in a disciplined and ethically sound way to solving problems in the real world; this will also require some engagement with empirical work. Clearly, the functions of theory-driven political philosophy and of problem-driven political philosophy are not mutually exclusive, but each piece of work (or strand in the literature) will pay more attention to one of those two functions.

This discussion is relevant because we might have different argumentative concerns depending on whether we are engaged in theory-driven research or problem-driven research. For example, a novel concept might be reducible to concept A in context 1, and to concept B in context 2, but since policy-making and social action might affect both context 1 and context 2, that novel concept might nevertheless have some guiding force there. A newly introduced concept might, at a high

found in Goodin 1982; Rothstein 1998, ch. 1; Sen 2006, 2009; Robeyns 2012; Wolff 2015; 2018; Green and Brandstedt 2021, and many others.

level of abstraction, be reducible to another (existing) concept. Despite that, the new concept might be much more illuminating or it might be more action-guiding on the ground, which would justify its existence. So, while theory-driven political philosophy is not always asking (and sometimes is explicitly *not* asking) if ideas can be developed into policy or institutional proposals, problem-driven political philosophy is often not asking whether ideas are theoretically distinctive, as long as those ideas primarily aim to contribute to solving the problems in the direction that our reasons, all things considered, tell us we should move.

This discussion also has implications for my response to Robert Huseby's argument, which I address in this article, especially in Sections 3 and 4. Huseby claims that limitarianism is in essence a combination of intrinsic egalitarianism and intrinsic sufficientarianism. In the next sections, I will deny these claims; but it is important to stress that in the work on limitarianism I have developed so far, it has been presented as a contribution to problem-driven rather than theory-driven political philosophy. Nevertheless, in Sections 3 and 4, I will go along with the theory-driven frame, since this is how I read the methodological commitments underlying Huseby's criticism. In Section 5, I will revisit these methodological concerns and explain why I believe that limitarianism has an action-guiding force for some real-world-problems that egalitarianism and sufficientarianism on their own do not have.

2. Limitarianism Restated and Refined

Before addressing Huseby's concerns in the next sections, I want to summarize what I have said about limitarianism in earlier work, as well as point to some other recent developments in the literature.¹⁵

Let us start with the core concepts. The limitarian view comes with four core concepts: first, the twin concepts of surplus money (or wealth) and the riches line, and second, the twin concepts of excess money and the limitarian threshold. The *limitarian threshold* is the line above which limitarianism claims no one should be situated: either there should be policies that make sure people are not situated above the limitarian threshold (wages regulation, caps on the lifetime inheritance level, and

15 Since I am responding to Huseby's critique in this article, it is important that I distinguish new developments clearly, since Huseby's critique addresses the arguments in my earlier work; Robeyns 2017.

so on), or there should be redistribution that takes away the money above the limitarian threshold to reallocate it below the threshold or to use it for funding public goods. *Excess wealth* is the money a person has above the limitarian threshold and which limitarianism claims the person should not have.

The notions of the *riches line* and *surplus wealth* are special cases of the more general notions of the limitarian threshold and excess wealth, if we use the value of flourishing as the criterion to determine the limitarian threshold. The *riches line* is the level of wealth accumulation at which, at some point of increasing wealth, there is no additional contribution of additional wealth to one's flourishing. Flourishing is taken to be a satiable concept, and once one arrives at a certain level of wealth, it is assumed that more money will not significantly further the value of one's flourishing, which could either decrease or (asymptotically) stay at the same level. I have not worked out this account of flourishing in great detail so far, but to the extent that it is worked out, it is clearly an objective-list account of flourishing rather than a hedonistic or desire-fulfilment account. I have also argued that it should cover only the material side of flourishing. Moreover, it is a *political* or *public* account, in the specific sense that it is an account of the value of flourishing used for decision-making in the public realm and for the design of institutions and practices. An important assumption I am endorsing is that, on that account of the value of flourishing, the marginal contribution of money to that value declines, and it either becomes asymptotically zero or at some point becomes zero or negative. The value of flourishing, in this sense, is taken to be satiable with respect to money. *Surplus wealth* is all the wealth a person has above the riches line; it is wealth that cannot contribute to such an objective and public account of flourishing.¹⁶

It should be noted that in my work on limitarianism so far, no distinction has been made between the riches line and the limitarian threshold, or between excess money and surplus money. Yet discussions with critics and collaborators have made it clear that the limitarian threshold, above which we take away and reallocate money, and the riches line, being the line at which surplus wealth kicks in, need not be

16 For more details on the account of flourishing and the construction of the riches line, see Robeyns 2017, 15–30). For an empirical study that confirms the empirical plausibility of the notion of the riches line, see Robeyns et al. 2021.

the same.¹⁷ Different reasons for limitarianism could point to different limitarian thresholds. For example, the limitarian threshold might be set at the level at which additional increases in personal wealth jeopardize one's moral autonomy, or at the level at which additional wealth poses a threat to democracy. It is conceptually possible, and in practice plausible, that these different criteria will lead to different limitarian thresholds from the threshold at which the value of flourishing becomes significantly close to zero.

Dick Timmer has argued that limitarians should not assume that the marginal value of wealth becomes zero or negative, and that they could accept that there is still flourishing above the limitarian threshold, but that this is outweighed by other moral concerns.¹⁸ In my view, because the account I defended is not a first-person account of flourishing but a public or political one, this can be accounted for. The account could recognize cases in which surplus wealth could still further someone's *personal* flourishing, but introducing the distinction of the political account of flourishing allows us to collectively decide that the value of that marginal contribution becomes zero. In other words, there might well be cases where flourishing itself, on that person's own assessments, is still increasing, but the value of flourishing, as decided by the political community, is zero.

A second clarification on limitarianism relates to the recipients of redistribution. A motivation for limitarianism, as well as an implication of it, is locating those bearing the costs of redistribution more centrally in the discussion. The literature on distributive justice has been primarily recipient-oriented and has therefore paid relatively little attention to the question of who holds the duties of justice, who will pay the costs of redistributive policies, and who could be the agents of justice.¹⁹ David Miller has argued along similar lines that there is a general agreement that certain moral needs need to be met—from saving people from famines to rescuing someone in direct danger—but that political philosophers have not argued in great detail about who bears the responsibility for

17 As discussed at the Utrecht workshop, Jan. 2019. See also Harel Ben Shahaar 2019; Timmer 2021c, 115–33.

18 Timmer 2021b.

19 As argued by O'Neill 2001; the subsequent literature has changed a little in this respect, but arguably not much. See Hickey et al. 2021.

meeting those needs.²⁰ Limitarianism wants to bring the cost-bearers of policies that have redistributive effects more centrally into view. As I will argue in Section 4, this is important for the argument about why limitarianism cannot be reduced to sufficientarianism.

A third point of clarification is that it does not follow from limitarianism that those who are situated below the riches line will not have to be net contributors to redistributive policies or to the funding of valuable public goods. In fact, my intuition is that the total amount of money needed to address all these ills (X) is larger than the total amount of surplus wealth (Y). Robert Huseby thinks that this is quite a bold empirical claim.²¹ I strongly doubt that, given that the unmet urgent needs are not only poverty and hunger, but also other forms of disadvantage and suffering (e.g. homelessness, children in need of special needs education, social exclusion, loneliness, and functional illiteracy), as well as various collective challenges, such as climate change and other ecological problems. There are currently very few, if any, countries that are meeting all these needs and collective challenges. Taken together, the problems are vast. In any case, my assumption that $X > Y$ explains part of the intuitions I had that prompted limitarianism: if the resources required to meet these unmet urgent needs are so vast that $X > Y$, then we should *start* by addressing those needs by using the money that is not used for people's flourishing, and if the aggregate surplus money is not enough to address all these injustices, unmet urgent needs, and societal challenges, then we can call upon the middle classes to also contribute to addressing them.

Fourth, so far I have defended two arguments for limitarianism, although I have stressed that I do not think these two arguments are necessarily exhaustive in terms of what could ground limitarianism.²² The first argument is the unmet urgent needs argument. As I indicated above, unmet urgent needs are related not just to poverty, but also to forms of disadvantage, isolation, and stigmatization, and to mental ill-health, as well as to collective action problems and public goods that are not sufficiently addressed, such as restoring biodiversity or

20 Miller 2001.

21 Huseby 2022.

22 Robeyns 2017. Zwarthoed (2019) has defended autonomy-based reasons for limitarianism.

climate-adaptation policies. The unmet urgent needs argument states that if there are interventions (whether by the state or other agents of change) that can mitigate unmet urgent needs and that require financial resources, the surplus money should be used to meet those needs. The other argument is the democratic argument, which states that surplus money is a threat to political equality and that, on the assumption that it is not possible to build institutional walls between the spheres of politics and the sphere of money, we should put limits on how much money people can have.

Fifth, limitarianism is a *partial account of justice*, which can be combined with different views of what justice requires below the threshold. Clearly, the idea that limitarians would not care about what happens below the threshold is very implausible, especially for those endorsing the unmet urgent needs argument. But there are several different principles that they can endorse below the limitarian threshold. They could, for example, additionally commit to prioritarianism, sufficientarianism, and egalitarianism. And all those principles could be responsibility-sensitive or not; moreover, they could be outcome- or opportunity-based principles. Adding limitarianism to this menu of principles gives us the tools to develop accounts of distributive justice that combine several of these principles rather than defending just one. While such pluralist accounts of distributive justice might perhaps be seen by some as less elegant, they empower philosophical thinking on issues concerning distributive morality. Moreover, pluralist accounts are especially important for action guidance in the real world, since we have reasons to let different distributive rules apply to persons with different levels of wealth.²³ I will return to this claim in Section 5, where I suggest what such a pluralist account of distributive justice could look like. But, first, I will explain why limitarianism cannot be reduced to either sufficientarianism or egalitarianism.

3. Egalitarianism and Limitarianism

If we have egalitarianism and sufficientarianism, do we still need limitarianism? According to Robert Huseby, limitarianism is best seen

²³ Herlitz (2019) argues this in relation to the distinction between the very worst off and other groups.

as a combination of instrumental egalitarianism and sufficientarianism, and therefore it is not limitarian as such.²⁴

Let us first look at egalitarianism. In essence, limitarianism cannot be reduced to egalitarianism, because, although there are different understandings of egalitarianism, for each of the plausible understandings there are fatal objections. Egalitarianism can, and does, mean several different things; it is a concept that has to be formulated into a more specific notion before it can be compared with limitarianism, since otherwise we run the risk of making a comparison between limitarianism and a 'moving target'. I will first show this by responding to Huseby's argument that the democratic argument for limitarianism is essentially an argument for equality, and then provide a further argument concerning how limitarianism and egalitarianism are distinct.

A. Does Political Equality Provide Support for Limitarianism?

Huseby argues that limitarianism is neither necessary nor sufficient for protecting the value of political equality. I agree that it is not sufficient and have never claimed otherwise. Yet limitarianism not being sufficient for political equality should not bother limitarians, since limitarianism is explicitly stated to be a *partial* principle of justice. Clearly, there are also non-distributive societal changes that are needed to protect political equality, such as citizens being educated and properly informed, as well as a particular distribution of wealth and other goods below the limitarian threshold. Thus, protecting political equality requires an array of measures.²⁵

According to Huseby, the danger to the value of political equality is not that people have surplus wealth; rather, inequality (in financial terms) is the root problem. I agree that *large* inequalities are what undermine political equality, and I think it is correct that this might give us reasons to adopt a *relative* limitarian threshold rather than an absolute one, as in the case of the riches line.²⁶ While the argument from unmet urgent needs leads us to adopt the riches line as the corresponding limitarian threshold, the democratic argument might lead to another limitarian threshold. But that doesn't make limitarianism superfluous;

²⁴ Huseby 2022, sect. I.

²⁵ See also Timmer 2019.

²⁶ See Harel Ben Shahar 2019.

rather, it requires a modification. Wealth limits are still a means to limit the size of the egalitarian gap. It is relevant, too, to point out that there is something special about surplus money for democratic purposes, which is that the opportunity cost in terms of flourishing for those who spend it on political influencing (thereby undermining political equality) is zero. Those without surplus wealth who spend money on political influencing are paying an opportunity cost in terms of their own material flourishing, and, moreover, are extremely limited in how much they can spend because they are not super-rich. The democracy-undermining effects of their gifts will be very limited. Meanwhile, given that the fortunes of the super-rich are on a scale reaching many billions of dollars, they can spend massive amounts of money at no real opportunity cost to themselves.

B. Is Egalitarianism the Superior Alternative?

Based on his analysis of the distribution of economic means and the value of political equality, Huseby argues that egalitarianism is the superior alternative to limitarianism. He writes:

the problem is really caused by a *discrepancy* in the holding of economic means between individuals. In light of this, the most reasonable strategy is to address the discrepancy as such. To do so, one can start at the top end, at the bottom end, or *both*. Robeyns chooses to start at the top end, without offering arguments for why we should not start at the bottom end ... or, most plausibly, why we should not start at both ends simultaneously.²⁷

In response, at least three things should be said. First, this quote ignores the fact that limitarianism has not been introduced as a *replacement* for any of the other patterns, but rather as a perspective that is currently missing in the philosophical debates on distributive justice.²⁸ The aim is to complement, not to replace. Second, to the extent that the value we want to protect is political equality, starting at the bottom end of the distribution will not solve much. Either people who are poor will use the increase in income to improve their low standard of living or they will be able to make very small donations to political campaigns. In other

²⁷ Huseby 2022, sect. II.A.

²⁸ Robeyns 2017, 2.

words, the result of reducing inequality by lifting the worst off up is not the same as the result of limiting what the best off have. Both strategies may be needed for some goals, but for enhancing political equality, the second strategy is more effective. Limitarianism is especially powerful and useful for drawing our attention to the negative effects on certain values that are particularly caused by a concentration of wealth. Third, to the extent that we are concerned with all values that are affected by the distribution of money, it follows from my argument that we should start at both ends simultaneously, as the argument from unmet urgent needs proposes that money should be moved from the top of the distribution to the bottom of the distribution, or that those at the top of the distribution should pay the cost of collective action strategies.

Yet according to Huseby, there is an available alternative that he regards as superior and which will reduce the problem to a greater extent. That alternative is egalitarianism. However, I do not think this claim is true. Egalitarianism does not make limitarianism superfluous, because egalitarianism is underspecified.

For one thing, egalitarianism could be specified as an outcome-based view or as an opportunity-based view. As an opportunity-based view, egalitarianism runs the risk either of being epistemically too demanding to be implementable in the real world or of leading to forms of disrespect, for example because its epistemic requirements lead to shameful revelations.²⁹ Opportunity-based egalitarianism might also allow for inequalities in outcome that have the bad and unjust effects that defenders of sufficientarianism and limitarianism have pointed out. Hence, limitarianism could easily have different implications from egalitarianism when the latter is understood as equality of opportunity.

However, perhaps the most charitable interpretation of Huseby's arguments is not opportunity egalitarianism, but outcome egalitarianism. Does outcome-based egalitarianism make limitarianism superfluous?

Outcome-based egalitarianism faces many well-known objections. The criticism of outcome-based views led, on the one hand, to opportunity-based views and responsibility-sensitive egalitarian theories and, on the other hand, to defences of relational egalitarianism and sufficientarianism with a low sufficiency threshold. It seems utterly implausible to believe, as a view on distributive justice in the real world,

29 E.g. Wolff 1998.

that no inequalities in outcomes could be justified at all. Clearly, people who lead more frugal lifestyles and spend less will save more and will justifiably have more wealth. Working more or doing unpleasant, dangerous, stressful, or otherwise very demanding work can all justify some inequalities in wages and thus in outcomes.³⁰ For those who reject strict outcome egalitarianism, limitarianism allows limits to be put on inequalities in outcomes, while retaining opportunity egalitarianism for other parts of the distribution. In particular, what I find an intuitively very plausible view is having low-level outcome-based sufficientarianism and a limitarian threshold combined with equality of opportunity for those who are situated between the sufficiency and limitarian thresholds. I will briefly return to such a hybrid view in Section 5.

Limitarianism in financial resources is an outcome-based notion. As a consequence, a distributive view that includes limitarianism could be either more demanding or less demanding than an egalitarian view. It could be more demanding when compared with opportunity-based egalitarianism, and less demanding compared with outcome-based egalitarianism. Limitarianism in itself allows for inequalities under the limitarian threshold that an outcome-based egalitarian view does not permit. This makes limitarianism less demanding than such an egalitarian view. On the other hand, if a limitarian account sets the limitarian threshold relatively low, then it might not allow for certain holdings of material wealth that an equality of opportunity view allows for, depending on the level of the riches line and depending on the specification of the opportunity view.

In sum, I agree with Huseby that egalitarianism, as an outcome-based notion, would reduce many problems, including political inequalities, that limitarianism aims to address to a far greater extent than limitarianism. But as an opportunity-based notion, it might not. Moreover, as an outcome-based notion, there are many reasons not to endorse egalitarianism. Limitarianism is one piece of a more comprehensive view that allows us to say that some outcome inequalities may be justified, but that even if these inequalities are justified, the discrepancy cannot become too big.

30 Brouwer and van der Deijl 2021; Mulligan 2021.

C. Tensions Between the Two Arguments for Limitarianism

In his discussion of limitarianism, Huseby observes potential tensions between the democratic argument (and the corresponding limitarian threshold) and the argument from unmet urgent needs (and its corresponding limitarian threshold, the riches line). I agree that this was a weakness of my original statement of limitarianism. And these tensions might become more important if we endorse more reasons for limitarian thresholds, depending on whether each reason justifies a different limitarian threshold, and depending on the consequences for other parts of the wealth distribution. Working out what this implies will require more than I can do here, but let me briefly respond to two points.

The first point is that in some contexts, limitarianism might be overdetermined in the sense that when the argument from unmet urgent needs is put into practice, it requires all surplus money, making the democratic argument unnecessary. I agree that this might happen. But while I read Huseby as thinking this is a weakness of my arguments, I think overdetermined moral responsibilities should be welcomed. Problem-driven political philosophy tries to have value for the world as it is, and overdetermined moral claims are easier to put into practice and therefore politically more robust: as long as all those involved in collective decision-making can endorse one of the reasons for limitarianism, they will find each other agreeing to implement the institutional change in question, despite not agreeing on what the single right reason is for doing so.³¹ To the extent that we want political philosophy to be problem-driven and not merely theory-driven, a principle being overdetermined is a desideratum, not a bug.

Second, as I indicated in Section 2, I agree that the two arguments might well lead to different limitarian thresholds. This insight will require limitarianism to work out how to deal with multiple limitarian thresholds, but I don't think it is a reason to reject limitarianism. Rather, the analysis should prompt egalitarians, sufficientarians, limitarians, and others to embrace the agenda of developing pluralist, hybrid

31 See also Sunstein (1998), who has argued for collective practical reasoning by means of incompletely theorized agreements.

theories, as will be argued in Section 5. But first I turn to the critique that limitarianism is reducible to sufficientarianism.

4. Sufficientarianism and Limitarianism

Is limitarianism reducible to sufficientarianism? As with egalitarianism, there are many versions of sufficientarianism—for example, different versions can differ in their scope, their metric, the level of the threshold, and whether they are a single-threshold or a multiple-threshold view.³² The comparison between sufficientarianism and limitarianism is not straightforward for at least two reasons. The first reason, which Huseby mentioned in another recent article, is that the version I developed ‘is explicitly non-ideal and resource-oriented, which makes a direct comparison between the two a bit difficult’.³³ In addition, although the sufficiency thresholds are often not spelled out in the sufficientarian literature, they range from a threshold at the poverty line, or perhaps at the mean quality of life among the population, to a much higher threshold akin to a fully good life. If we are interested in comparisons of substantive positions and not *merely* in the structures of a certain concept, we must have a sufficiently clear sense of what, substantively, we are comparing. Otherwise, comparing sufficientarianism and limitarianism will require limitarianism to be compared with a moving target.

My own view is in line with those who think that sufficientarianism captures something regarding obligations of justice to the genuinely badly off: that is, those who are suffering in some important sense, not in a marginal sense. The higher the sufficientarian threshold is, the more sufficientarianism is prone to critiques of overdemandingness and leading to recommendations that create unfairness. There is also another reason why the sufficientarian threshold should be low, which applies to the sufficientarians who support the thesis that once everyone has secured enough, no distributive criteria apply to benefits.³⁴ Shields has argued that these sufficientarians cannot set the threshold high, since it would deprive the view of any distinctive guidance.³⁵ One might construct views that one labels ‘sufficientarian’ and that consist of other

32 Casal 2007; Gosseries 2011; Shields 2012, 2020; Huseby 2019.

33 Huseby 2020, 211–12.

34 This is a version of the negative thesis (see next paragraph).

35 Shields 2012, 103–5.

distributive principles in the range below the threshold or thresholds, such as prioritarianism; but then we are talking about hybrid views, and Shields is right that the distinctive guidance they offer is not a sufficientarian one. Although, as I will argue in Section 5, I endorse advancing hybrid accounts of distributive justice, for the task of asking whether limitarianism boils down to sufficientarianism, we must compare it with a ‘pure’ and plausible sufficientarian account, not with those that are *de facto* hybrid views.

Recall that sufficientarianism entails two theses: ‘[t]he *positive* thesis stresses the importance of people living above a certain threshold, free from deprivation. The *negative thesis* denies the relevance of certain additional distributive requirements.’³⁶ If sufficientarianism entails only one threshold, and we do not collapse the sufficiency threshold and the limitarian threshold, then sufficientarianism cannot do the work that limitarianism does. For those who believe that the category of ‘the poor’ or ‘the deprived’ is relevant to normative thinking, limitarianism has been introduced to make a distinction between three groups: the deprived; those who are not deprived, but are not fully flourishing; and those who have more resources than they need for full flourishing. It has also been introduced to put more focus on those who have obligations or responsibilities regarding financial support.

Table 1 illustrates that the work limitarianism does, with its explicit focus on who should pay for the costs, cannot be reduced to single-threshold sufficientarianism. In the initial situation, the lowest-level group is deprived, since it needs 20 units of resources to cross the poverty line, or the sufficiency threshold, but only has 10. Where will those 10 units be taken from? That is where limitarianism comes in. Suppose that with 50 units of resources, one is flourishing fully; all additional resources represent surplus wealth. State A is sufficientarian, but not limitarian; State B is sufficientarian *and* limitarian, and State C is egalitarian. Sufficientarianism, at least to the extent that such a view does not have particular additional principles above the sufficientarian threshold, would be satisfied with a move to A, but limitarianism would not.³⁷

³⁶ Casal 2007, 297–8.

³⁷ Additional principles above the sufficientarian threshold are not what makes such views sufficientarian; they make such views hybrid.

Table 1. Sufficientarian redistributions with and without limitarianism

Poverty line/sufficiency threshold = 20 units				
	Lower class	Middle class	Upper class	Total wealth
Initial situation	10	30	60	100
State A	20	25	55	100
State B	20	30	50	100
State C	33.3	33.3	33.3	100

One might respond that what really matters is the comparison at a more principled level, and that we should look at which values are foundational. But there, too, limitarianism cannot be reduced to sufficientarianism. Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that sufficientarianism can be grounded on an impersonal values, such as ‘the impersonal disvalue of individuals having insufficiently good lives’.³⁸ It is correct that the argument from unmet urgent needs is grounded in the same disvalue. But that is not the only impersonal value that grounds this argument; the other two values focus on the contributors.

The first is the *disvalue of waste*: since by definition surplus money cannot contribute to the flourishing of the super-rich, it is wasteful to let them spend their money on private yachts if that money can meet urgent needs of the deprived. The second is the *principle of financial capacity*. In his discussion of distributive responsibilities, Miller discusses the principle of capacity, which states that those who are most able to address the needs or the problem have a greater or first responsibility for doing so. In the present context, we might split this principle of capacity into two parts: those who have the financial capacity to deliver the money that is needed to solve the relevant problems might not be the same people as those who have the agentic capacity to set up and execute the acts if and when they have the necessary financial resources. Limitarianism

38 Huseby 2019, 18.

is also based on the principle of financial capacity: those who have the strongest financial shoulders should be the first to contribute.

What about the comparison with a multi-threshold sufficientarian view? Perhaps, one might argue, a two-threshold sufficientarian view that sets the second sufficiency threshold as equal to the level of full human flourishing makes limitarianism otiose? Such a two-level threshold, whereby there is a lower threshold at the poverty or deprivation level and a second at the limitarian level of a fully flourishing life, seems to be the view that, qua structures, brings sufficientarianism and limitarianism most closely together.

Yet even here the similarity is deceiving. Sufficientarianism states that justice requires everyone to meet those two thresholds, and sufficientarianism *in itself* doesn't care about what happens above the thresholds.³⁹ Limitarianism also entails a threshold, but focuses on the people situated above the threshold, claiming that we have reasons to not want people to be situated above that threshold—but it does not say anything about what is needed between the low sufficiency threshold and the higher sufficiency threshold. Indeed, Volacu and Dumitru capture it accurately:

Robeyns is seeking to turn the sufficiency view on its head. Sufficientarians are interested in the beneficiaries of redistributive processes, specifying a threshold of relevancy and attempting to bring as many individuals as possible to that threshold or close to that threshold. Limitarians, by contrast, are primarily interested in the duty-bearers of redistributive processes.⁴⁰

Sufficiency views are about why everyone should be *on or above* one or more sufficientarian thresholds; limitarian views are about why everyone should be *below* a limitarian threshold. Sufficientarian views are about securing that everyone has enough of what matters; limitarian views are about nobody having too many scarce resources. Both are threshold views, but they are asking fundamentally different questions. Sufficiency views are an answer, or a partial answer, to the question 'What is owed to people?'. Limitarian views are a partial answer to the

³⁹ Again, sufficientarianism combined with principles of what needs to happen above the upper threshold would care, but then we have entered the terrain of hybrid pluralist views (on which see Section 5).

⁴⁰ Volacu and Dumitru 2018, 250.

question ‘What do those above the limitarian threshold owe to others?’. And in answering the latter question, limitarians not only refer to the values of equality, or sufficiency, but can also refer to a plurality of values that need protecting by constraining excess wealth accumulation.

A sufficientarian might still object that, qua structure, limitarianism is a two-level version of sufficientarianism. I would want to resist this conclusion for at least three reasons. First, as I mentioned at the beginning of this section, I side with those who think the strong intuition of sufficientarianism is to focus on meeting a set of basic needs that we want to fulfil for all. Two-level sufficientarianism with additional principles applying to the ranges between thresholds can no doubt be worked out in interesting theories, but they are pluralist or hybrid theories that add additional elements to what is genuinely sufficientarian.

Second, keeping the focus of sufficiency on unconditionally meeting basic needs is especially important for philosophy aiming to address real-world problems, since the poverty line (and addressing disadvantage) is clearly recognised as a separate concern. There are separate societal challenges that arise from the issues caused by wealth concentration. Sufficientarian and limitarian thresholds are indeed all thresholds, but the underlying empirical reality and the problems of poverty or deprivation and that of excess wealth are vastly different.⁴¹ Philosophers lose action-guiding power by calling hybrid theories ‘sufficientarian theories’.

Third, conceptually there remains the question of separating out the bearers of the costs from the recipients of the increased benefits. This is especially important for the questions about the distributive ethics of providing public goods—questions that are virtually absent from the sufficientarian literature.

In the end, rather than arguing over whether limitarianism can be reduced to multiple-threshold sufficientarianism, I think more is to be gained from exploring the value of combining those views, to which I now turn.

41 Hence the need to engage deeply with empirical knowledge, and draw on empirically grounded methods.

5. The Role of Limitarianism in Pluralist Theories of Distributive Justice

Limitarianism is explicitly a partial distributive justice rule; it can be combined with rules or patterns below the threshold in order to become a full account of justice. It adds an explicit focus on the bearers of the costs—those from whom the resources for redistribution will be taken or those who will have fewer resources (compared with the pre-limitarian situation) due to measures such as maximum income legislation or a cap on inheritance. But something similar arguably holds for sufficientarianism. For example, Shields has recently argued that sufficientarianism is much better able to respond to the objection that it is implausibly indifferent to what happens above the threshold if it becomes part of a pluralist view that combines sufficiency with prioritarianism, egalitarianism, and/or utilitarianism.⁴² Shields rightly traces pluralist accounts to John Rawls, and Paula Casal also discusses pluralist accounts in her detailed critique of sufficientarianism.⁴³

In my view, limitarianism can provide sufficientarians with some tools that sufficientarians need to make their account more plausible, and the reverse is equally true. If the sufficientarian threshold is low, limitarianism can help us make a choice between moving everyone above that low threshold by taking resources from those who have more than they need for fully flourishing lives or from those who are not deprived, yet are not fully flourishing, as the numerical example in Table 1 illustrated. If there is a second, higher sufficientarian threshold that is lower than the limitarian threshold, exactly the same questions can be asked, and limitarianism can play exactly the same role in developing an account of distributive justice. If, however, the higher sufficientarian threshold lies at the level of the limitarian threshold, we have a theory that is essentially egalitarian in aspiration.

Sufficiency is essentially recipient-oriented: it deals with what we want people to have. Limitarianism tries, on the one hand, to avoid the harms of excess wealth, and, on the other hand, it is contribution-oriented: it is concerned with who should contribute to the redistributive

⁴² Shields 2020, 7–9.

⁴³ Casal 2007.

policies and interventions aimed at collective action problems, and how much they should contribute. Combining one or more sufficientarian thresholds with limitarian thresholds allows sufficientarians to say something about where the resources for the goals of sufficiency will be taken from.

Pluralist accounts of distributive justice can be pluralist regarding the distributive rules that apply to different parts of the distribution, or they can be pluralist in relation to the distributive rules that apply to different metrics of justice. They are also very likely to be pluralist with respect to the underlying values that the proposed patterns will aim to protect. One pluralist view that, in my view, requires further examination is having an account of distributive justice that has three tiers.⁴⁴ The first tier would be a low-level sufficientarian threshold in terms of *basic* functionings and capabilities, which makes sure everyone, independent of differential needs, can live a dignified life without suffering poverty or social exclusion. For this first tier, the values of sufficiency and human dignity would be the most important, and values of personal responsibility and efficiency would not play a role. The second tier would impose a limit on financial means (income and especially wealth) so as to protect a range of values, including political equality, non-waste, and non-domination. The third tier would sit between the sufficiency threshold and the limitarian threshold and an incentives-compatible account of equality of opportunity would be its most important value. While I do not have the space here to work out such an account, it is pluralist in terms of its metrics, distributive rules, and values. Given that distributive justice affects multiple values, and that those values conflict in some contexts, a pluralist account of distributive justice as sketched here allows us to give lexical priority to some values in some parts of the distribution.⁴⁵

This very brief sketch no doubt leaves many questions unanswered, but I hope it can serve to illustrate the point that by introducing limitarianism to our theorizing of distributive justice, we are making theories of distributive justice more potent in spelling out what we want from them for the world as it is and for nearby possible worlds.

44 This pluralist account of distributive justice was presented to audiences at the HDCA conference in Cape Town (Sept. 2017) and the Utrecht workshop on the pattern of distributive justice (Jan. 2019).

45 As is the case in Rawls's theory of 'Justice as Fairness'; Rawls 1999.

6. What Can Limitarianism Contribute?

In the previous sections, I argued against the view that limitarianism can be reduced to a combination of sufficiency and egalitarianism. Starting from the theory-driven terms of the debate that Huseby set, I have argued that limitarianism has things to offer theories of justice that we cannot find either in a defensible form of egalitarianism or in plausible forms of sufficientarianism (to the extent that they are sufficientarian and not in so far as they are hybrid). In this closing section, I want to return to some comments made earlier and draw some threads together.

First, when judging whether a proposed view is distinct, problem-driven philosophy would ask us to engage with *all its arguments taken together*. Even if there is a better view for reason 1 and another better view for reason 2, it might be the case that those who are concerned with *both* reason 1 and reason 2 should be endorsing a third view that best addresses these two reasons. I think this general methodological argument applies to how one should judge limitarianism. Neither of the existing views captures a distinct worry that the limitarian view tries to address, which is that some (in the middle classes) would have costs imposed on them for redistributive or public goods purposes while others could keep surplus wealth which does not improve their flourishing. It does not follow from the fact that some limitarian arguments are shared by other views that limitarianism cannot have its own set of grounding values and arguments.

There is a further point to be made. Suppose it were the case, as Huseby believes, that limitarianism adds nothing to egalitarianism or sufficientarianism. It would then have to be true that we could fully understand and appreciate *the normative concerns* with surplus wealth from the perspective of equality and sufficiency. But the whole point about introducing a focus on the upper side of the distribution is to enable us to ask and investigate what the distinct reasons are for worrying about extreme wealth. Excess wealth creates worries that concern all of the following elements: not asking enough about who will pay for the costs of redistribution; the undermining of democratic values by those who can do so at no significant cost to themselves; a radical waste of resources; power imbalances; the loss of moral autonomy; domination and the undermining of human dignity; and easy funding solutions to collective action problems not being seized. These normative concerns

cannot be expressed with the same precision and clarity when relying on the notions of egalitarianism and sufficientarianism.

My final point concerns how I see the playing field on which limitarianism should be judged. Limitarianism was first introduced as ‘a view of distributive justice’ or ‘a partial account of distributive justice’.⁴⁶ I still hold that to be true, but I have also come to see more clearly that political philosophers have different views on what they take to be a view of distributive justice—and my take on this is presumably broader than those of many others. Theory-driven political philosophers are especially interested in what the reasons for a certain normative claim are and whether those reasons are theoretically distinct. Problem-driven political philosophers are less interested in whether, at a theoretical level, one of those reasons can be reduced to another reason. Instead, they seek reasons that have a distinct contribution to make to addressing real-world-problems. I believe this is the case for limitarianism, and I interpret the political interest in limitarianism to support this belief.

Answering the question about what limitarianism contributes cannot be reduced to asking whether at a theoretical level limitarianism is reducible to egalitarianism and sufficientarianism. There are likely to be people who endorse the position that egalitarianism is overdemanding, but that there should be limits on inequality by protecting the vulnerable and by limiting excess wealth, while allowing inequalities between those two extremes. There will also be those who care less about distributive justice in itself and think that the absence of domination, both in politics and in the social realm, is the most important value to protect, and who endorse limitarianism on those grounds. And there will be those who have moderate welfarist inclinations and believe that concentration of wealth where it only leads to the possession of status goods and luxuries is wasteful in a society in which so many urgent needs are unmet.

All these groups, and others, can agree on the political desirability and justification of limits to wealth concentration; for them it is important to agree about having a reason for acting to limit wealth concentration (but each can have another reason). They don’t need to know whether there is, in a narrow philosophical sense, something ‘distinctive’ about limitarianism.⁴⁷ Given reasonable value pluralism, it is likely that not

⁴⁶ Robeyns 2017, 1.

⁴⁷ See also Timmer (2021b) on limitarianism as a mid-level principle.

all citizens will have reasons to endorse outcome egalitarianism; but if all citizens have reasons, albeit different ones, to endorse limitarianism, then that is a major strength for the limitarian view. If an important role of political philosophy is to address real-world problems, then in situations such as this one, limitarianism will be more action-guiding, since everyone can sign up to the limitarian proposals, but not everyone would sign up to egalitarian or high-threshold sufficientarian views.

The question of what the value and limits of limitarianism are cannot be answered, therefore, without first asking what we want from a theory of justice.⁴⁸ Many different answers can be given to that question. Of course, problem-driven philosophers also want there to be sound reasons to endorse a normative claim; they have as much an interest as theory-driven political philosophers that their normative analyses be sound. But in addition, they want limitarianism to be judged by the answer to the question whether it can help to address problems in the world as it is and in nearby possible worlds, either by it being developed into guiding ideals or by shifting the public discourse in a different way. Because there are distinct reasons to endorse limitarianism, and because it does not commit us to the normatively implausible parts of egalitarianism, limitarianism does have a role to play in real-world political morality.

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⁴⁸ Which was, of course, the question that Sen (2006) asked.

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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 Rääkkä (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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9. Sufficiency, Limits, and Multi-Threshold Views

Colin Hickey

1. Introduction

Sufficientarianism, which has by now been amply discussed in the literature on distributive justice, maintains that we have particularly weighty (perhaps even distinct in kind) reasons to make sure that people have enough of certain goods. A more recent entrant to the literature on distributive justice is a view called “limitarianism.” Coined by Ingrid Robeyns, limitarianism maintains that it is impermissible to have too much of certain goods (Robeyns 2017). In other words, there are upper limits on how many resources we can justifiably have. Others in the literature have taken limitarianism as “turn[ing] the sufficiency view on its head” (Volacu and Dumitru 2019). While the sufficientarian identifies a threshold past which everyone should reside, the limitarian identifies a threshold below which everyone must stay.¹

In this chapter I assess the relation between these two views.² In particular, I investigate whether sufficientarians should (or even must)

1 Below I will discuss some of the arguments offered in favour of limitarianism, and throughout help to clarify its intended import, given that it is a less familiar view than sufficientarianism. We can begin, however, simply with this wide and intuitive understanding of the kind of functional role it aims to play.

2 Robeyns (2017, p. 38) foreshadows the possibility of an eventual investigation of this kind, writing, “One particular question that requires attention is how limitarianism relates to the understanding of sufficiency in terms of a shift in the reasons we give for caring about benefits below and above the threshold, rather than the more dominant understanding of simply caring that everyone has enough.” Introducing limitarianism means we have to consider how resources above the wealth limit

also endorse a limitarian thesis, and similarly whether limitarians should (or even must) also endorse a sufficiency thesis. I argue affirmatively that sufficientarians have very good reasons to adopt a limitarian thesis, as do limitarians to adopt a sufficientarian thesis. To put it differently, rather than simply turning the other view ‘on its head,’ I hope to show that the two views each contain within themselves the seed for the other.

The question of whether each view *must* also embrace the other is more contentious. While I entertain some speculative arguments about a necessary conceptual connection between the views, the results are more tentative. So, though it may in principle be possible to affirm one view without the other, doing so is hard to motivate and not advisable.

Of course, there is substantial variety in the type of sufficientarianism or limitarianism people do or could adopt. I am trying, here, to be widely ecumenical to understand the general structure of the relation between the views; so this isn’t to say there couldn’t be good reasons for certain versions of one to reject certain versions of the other.³

I end the chapter by suggesting some reasons why it should actually be less surprising than we might think that our most plausible theories of distributive justice would turn out to be “multi-threshold” views of a certain structure, containing (at least) one sufficientarian threshold and one limitarian threshold. Without discounting the challenge of specifying the substantive content of such sufficientarian and limitarian thresholds, the general structure maps on so neatly to our standard deontic conceptual language that it ought not to be a shock that our theories of distributive justice would take a parallel form.

2. Should Sufficientarians Also Be Limitarians? Must They?

I begin, in this section, by considering whether sufficientarians should (or even must) also endorse a limitarian thesis defining an upper limit on resource accumulation. I do so first by responding to a preliminary

relate to moral claims, not only of those below the sufficiency threshold, but also potentially those in the intermediate space above it but below the wealth limit. I will discuss this further below.

3 I cannot be completely ecumenical. For instance, if someone insists on holding a strong version of the “negative thesis” of sufficientarianism, as discussed below, and refuses to accept any movement towards the non-ideal discussion, they may not be convinced.

objection that would derail the idea from the start. I then consider some more positive reasons in favour of sufficientarians additionally endorsing a limitarian thesis. I close the section by entertaining some more speculative conceptual reasons as to why doing so might indeed be necessary.

2.1 A Preliminary Objection

The idea that sufficientarians should also be limitarians might strike some who are familiar with the sufficientarian literature as immediately objectionable. Traditionally, sufficientarianism has been pitched in connection with two theses: one “positive” and one “negative” (Casal 2007). The positive thesis highlights the particularly weighty reasons that we have to ensure that people secure enough of some goods.⁴ The negative thesis, on the other hand, is meant to suggest that once everyone has crossed the threshold with enough, no distributive criteria apply to the distribution of benefits and burdens above the threshold.⁵ As such, sufficientarianism is often taken to be a more minimalist kind of theory of distributive justice. It is a way of saying that, once people have enough, we do not have to worry about certain kinds of inequalities, or always prioritize the worst off.

In light of this standard picture, the potential problem for suggesting that sufficientarians ought also to adopt a limitarian thesis is not difficult to see. Wouldn't sufficientarianism's negative thesis rule out the possibility of also being committed to limitarianism from the start? After all, the negative thesis endorses the claim that “no distributive criteria apply” above the sufficiency threshold. But by suggesting that there are limits to the amount of resources one can justifiably accumulate, limitarianism *is* a distributive criterion above the sufficiency threshold. On its face, this seems inconsistent with the standard sufficientarian picture, and so attempting to merge the two might seem dead on arrival.

4 I am borrowing here from Liam Shields' (2012, p. 106) formulation. Casal's original statement of the positive thesis is that “it is important that people live above a certain threshold, free from deprivation.” See (2007, pp. 298–299).

5 This may be putting it slightly too strongly, as even Roger Crisp's (2003a) well-known defense of the negative thesis does allow that there may be some aggregative criteria (to produce more rather than less, even if you don't care about the distribution).

There are three points to make in response, in order to blunt the force of the charge and preserve the possibility that sufficientarians at least *can* additionally endorse limitarianism, so that we can determine below whether they *should* (or must). The first two concern how we should understand the status of the negative thesis and its relation to a potential limitarian commitment. The third challenges whether sufficientarians should endorse the negative thesis at all, and if so in what form.

The *first point* is a methodological one. In evaluating whether the negative thesis would foreclose the possibility of a concomitant limitarian threshold (much less recommend one), we should be attentive to the context and purposes for which sufficientarian arguments were proposed. This is the best way to understand and assess the core commitments of sufficientarianism and whether they should either prohibit or suggest a companion limitarian thesis. In other words, I suggest that we should interpret the claim of the negative thesis in light of its discursive target.

With that in mind, we can move to the *second point*. When Paula Casal first introduced and tried to clarify the conceptual core of sufficientarianism with the distinction between the positive and negative thesis, interestingly she pitched the latter as a “rejection of egalitarian and prioritarian reasoning at least above some critical threshold” (Casal 2007, p. 299). Noticeably absent is a rejection of limitarian reasoning. Now, of course it may appear slightly unfair to point out the omission in Casal’s statement as evidence of possible compatibility between the two. After all, the term “limitarianism” was only introduced subsequently. That said, it is in fact revealing for what the standard target is for defending and conceptually isolating sufficientarian thinking; namely, it targets particular kinds of (egalitarian and prioritarian) distributive patterns in *ideal* theorizing about distributive justice. Especially when we conjoin Casal’s claim with other classical statements of the negative thesis in the literature, a picture starts to emerge about the intended shape of the concept, and scope of the negative thesis, which is informative for how we should interpret its potential compatibility with a limitarian partner.

Consider, for instance, Harry Frankfurt’s version of the negative thesis: “if everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether

some had more than others” (Frankfurt 1987, p. 21).⁶ Or, similarly, while considering and rejecting the negative thesis, Shields summarizes it this way: “once everyone has secured enough, no distributive criteria apply to [additional] benefits.”⁷ Unsurprisingly, the antecedents matter greatly here. Neither statement of the negative thesis provides any license to infer that a limitarian thesis couldn’t apply in circumstances where people do not have enough. But limitarianism (and its call for limits on individual resource accumulation) was explicitly introduced as a partial, non-ideal theory of justice. It was only ever meant to apply in our radically non-ideal circumstances.⁸ So even if the fundamental core of sufficientarianism requires a robust negative thesis of this variety (something I will question below), it is consistent with the fundamental core of limitarianism because the limitarian thesis is reserved for when the antecedent of the negative thesis is unsatisfied; a non-ideal world where countless people fall below the sufficiency threshold. Restricting the domain of potential compatibility in this way does not betray the spirit of sufficientarianism, which also has significant designs on non-ideal theorizing.⁹ So, for a significant (perhaps predominant) range of purposes to which we should want to put the concept to productive use, sufficientarianism’s negative thesis doesn’t preclude a limitarian counterpart.¹⁰

This brings us to the *third point* to mention in response to the preliminary objection, which is that there is a plausible case to be made

6 Frankfurt is, of course, mostly concerned with trying to show that we shouldn’t exaggerate the importance of economic equality, which is exactly my point; that we shouldn’t take the surface grammar of statements meant to criticize egalitarianism as forming some immutable core of sufficientarianism that would block limitarianism.

7 Shields does add, however, that “wholly aggregative criteria may apply” (2012, p. 103). See also David Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen’s (2015, p. 409) statement “once people are free from [significant pressure against succeeding in central areas of human life], inequalities are *irrelevant* from the point of view of justice.”

8 This point is made particularly clear in Robeyns (2022). In addition to the other arguments we will discuss below, Robeyns (2019, pp. 258–260) offers an explicitly “ecological argument” for limitarianism in the context of climate change, using wealth limits to fund mitigation and adaptation efforts. See also, e.g., Millward-Hopkins (2022) and Wiedmann et al. (2020).

9 For a specifically non-ideal argument for sufficientarianism, see Carey (2020).

10 I do not think doing so is required, but if readers feel otherwise, my overall thesis can be restricted in scope or pitched exclusively at the level of institutional design rather than fundamental values (to bracket the pure ideal-theoretic sufficientarian) and still be an interesting development.

that sufficientarians should reject this formulation of the negative thesis anyway. If sufficientarians do not endorse this version (call it the “strong” version) of the negative thesis, then there is no reason to block them from endorsing distributive principles above the sufficiency threshold (of any stripe, not merely limitarian principles). The argument for releasing the negative thesis, at least in this strong form, leans heavily on the influential work of Liam Shields, who has argued (persuasively, I think) that the essential conceptual core of sufficientarianism resides in the conjunction of the positive thesis from above and what he calls the “shift thesis.”

Shift Thesis: once people have secured enough there is a discontinuity in the rate of change of the marginal weight of our reasons to benefit them further (Shields 2012; 2016).¹¹

I cannot, here, wade too far into the debate about Shields’ view, except to signal that it seems he is on to something important in denying that there is any good motivation at the conceptual core of sufficientarianism for maintaining the strong negative thesis. In fact, it has been the feature that has seemed particularly objectionable to critics of sufficientarianism; that it is indifferent to inequalities above the threshold that it shouldn’t be indifferent to (Shields 2012, p. 104).¹² Undercutting this objection to sufficientarianism, while still preserving focal concern with certain distinct and morally important kinds of deprivation is likely a positive step for the sufficientarian. This is especially true if, as I argue below, they can do so while capturing an even more sensible version of the

11 Shields entertains that a different kind of thesis could, together with the positive thesis, help form the core of sufficientarianism, in particular a “diminution thesis” which states that “once people have secured enough our reasons to benefit them further are weaker” (2012, p. 107). He rejects this because he thinks it would not sufficiently distinguish the view from prioritarianism. I am not sure how strong of a desiderata this is, or whether there are other theoretical or pragmatic considerations that would adequately mark out this kind of sufficientarianism. It may be that being analytically distinct (rather than usefully separable, but ultimately inter-definable/translatable) is not a decisive point one way or another.

12 Correspondingly, once we drop the negative thesis for sufficientarianism, the standard egalitarian’s motivation for denying the core sufficientarian thesis decreases markedly. They have good reason to endorse the idea that the reasons are particularly weighty for having enough of certain goods, *particularly in contexts when equality is not possible*. They simply will want to maintain an additional claim about the distinctive value, and sometimes-normative-difference-maker of equality.

intuition undergirding the negative thesis—that some inequalities above the threshold do not matter.

On the other hand, Robert Huseby has recently developed a very different understanding of the negative thesis, which would actually make accepting it point more strongly in the direction of also adopting limitarianism (Huseby 2020).¹³ Instead of conceiving of the negative thesis, in marking out a domain above which distributive criteria do not apply, as referring to the same threshold as the threshold which marks out the category it is especially important for people to reach (i.e., the sufficiency threshold), he interprets it as referring to a different threshold. On this interpretation, the negative thesis is meant to refer just to the idea that “there is a level of well-being N such that above it, justice concerns do not arise, and such that those below [have] absolute priority over those above it” (Huseby 2020, p. 213). That level, N , might be very much higher than the sufficiency threshold, which would help avoid sufficientarianism being indifferent to certain inequalities and claims of those positioned above the sufficiency threshold.

This reading of the negative thesis actually makes it particularly compatible with limitarianism (indeed, it almost turns the negative thesis into a limitarian thesis about where the upper limit resides).¹⁴ On this interpretation, both the negative thesis and limitarianism indicate a position above the sufficiency threshold where additional goods provide no moral or justice-based value, and where those below it have absolute priority. All of which is to say, there is plenty of room for sufficientarians to also endorse limitarianism.

2.2 The Positive Case in Favour

In the previous subsection, I have tried to respond to a preliminary objection to the idea that sufficientarians should also be limitarians. Hoping to have carved open enough space for such a possibility, in this subsection I will develop the rudiments of a positive argument in favour of the idea.

There is an obvious sense in which the positive case rests on the merit of the arguments for limitarianism. If they are compelling, of

¹³ See particularly Huseby’s Section 3.

¹⁴ It does not actually do so, and would take an additional premise, but Huseby himself suggests it is “supported” by Robeyns’ limitarianism. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

course, the sufficientarian should endorse them, even if that were to require dropping a conceptual claim like the strong negative thesis.¹⁵ And while I will say somewhat more about the significant power of the undergirding intuitions and strength of those arguments later on, this would not be a particularly interesting finding because it has the form ‘S should believe L because L is true.’¹⁶

So instead, I want to talk about some *other* (more internal) reasons why there is a case to be made for sufficientarians to embrace limitarianism. I want to suggest a number of ways in which doing so helps the sufficientarian address lurking issues, while coming with little theoretical cost.

I mentioned above, following Shields, that there may be good reason for sufficientarians to drop the strongest version of the negative thesis. In part, this is because it seems to have counterintuitive implications, namely that it is “indifferent” to inequalities above the threshold that it shouldn’t be indifferent to. Someone who is treading water just above the threshold is in a very different position than a billionaire whose wildest dreams are satisfied.¹⁷ Dropping that strongest version of the negative thesis provides the conceptual space for addressing those counterintuitive implications. But actually, warding off the objection requires providing a positive account of why one is not *in fact* indifferent rather than merely pointing out (by dropping the strong negative thesis) that the view is not *in principle* indifferent.

In articulating when we can be said to have too much, limitarianism provides just such an account. Moreover, it does so in a way that can preserve what is likely the most fundamental and plausible insight from the original formulation of the strong negative thesis, which is that some inequalities above the threshold do not matter. It just refines the insight by pointing out that some do. For the limitarian, the inequality between the person making \$60,000 and \$65,000 might not matter (assume that they are both comfortably above the sufficiency threshold) but the

15 Which, as I mentioned above, I don’t think is required, even though there is good reason to.

16 Although it might be an interesting feature that, if this requires abandoning the strong negative thesis, the reason would be because of limitarianism.

17 Unless the threshold is interpreted so high as to make the difference plausibly meaningless. But doing so would betray the idea of sufficiency as a theory about a social minimum and do significantly more violence to the core idea than dropping the strong negative thesis.

inequality between someone making \$15,000 (assume that puts them just above the sufficiency threshold) and \$1,000,000 (assume that puts them above the limitarian threshold) does.¹⁸ This also preserves the sufficientarian's resources for rejecting certain forms of prioritarian and egalitarian reasoning, without opening itself up to the most obvious kinds of objections they can lodge about priorities or inequalities that clearly seem to matter.

Additionally, the discourse around sufficientarianism is often heavily *recipient*-oriented. It focuses largely on characterizing what people are owed, and why those entitlements are particularly morally important (or their deprivation particularly pernicious), etc., rather than who does the owing. Supplementing with a limitarian view (especially, as discussed below, which is justified by the very same values) helps fill out the corresponding duty side of the equation for a more complete theory of distributive justice. It does not, of course, fill in all the gaps about responsibility, but does provide a much-needed infusion in that direction. Rejecting it basically amounts to rejecting the lowest-hanging fruit of the duty side of the ledger. I will say something more about this point in Section 5, below.

Embracing a limitarian thesis can, therefore, help the sufficientarian solve some problems and fill in some gaps. But it also can do so at relatively low theoretical cost. One of the main worries people have about limitarianism is scepticism about the idea that we can identify upper thresholds in a non-arbitrary way (see Timmer 2021b; 2022).¹⁹ Embracing limitarianism, for the sufficientarian, adds another threshold to be sure. But they are already committed to the existence and defensibility of one non-arbitrarily specified threshold (see Huseby 2020). So, adding another (limitarian) one doesn't bring a *unique* kind of problem (as it would for a view that didn't accept *any* thresholds). In for a penny, in for a pound, as it were. The key point is that the general kind of vulnerabilities for limitarianism don't add much theoretical cost to a view which already is committed to the same kind of theoretical device, justified by the same kinds of reasons, at its foundation. This is particularly true if sufficientarians follow Huseby's novel formulation of

18 Obviously, these figures are just meant schematically, not to imply the ultimate commitments of the sufficientarian or limitarian.

19 For additional considerations defending thresholds (whether between needs and wants, or regarding personhood, luxuries, or pain) see Benbaji (2005; 2006).

the negative thesis mentioned above, in which they are essentially already committed to identifying and defending the kind of upper threshold the limitarian would adopt.²⁰ A separate point, also worth raising, is that once situated with non-ideal concerns, which is the particular focus for limitarianism, this kind of worry about arbitrariness, and therefore its potential theoretical cost, becomes even smaller as there can be good reasons to endorse thresholds that are legally or politically defensible, even if in some sense metaphysically arbitrary.²¹

2.3 The Necessity Claim (and the “Circumstances of Justice”)

Now that I have considered a few arguments in favour of the idea that sufficientarians have some important reasons to also endorse a limitarian thesis, I want to entertain the idea that they must do so. In particular, I want to look at one speculative argument that enquires into the very concept of the “circumstances of justice” themselves to locate a reason why sufficientarianism must also be committed to a limitarian thesis (under some description).

Consider, then, the standard concept of the “circumstances of justice.” Essentially, the circumstances of justice serve as the conditions for the application of principles of justice. Following Rawls (who is himself following Hume), these are the “conditions under which human cooperation is both possible and necessary” (Rawls 1999, p. 110).²² The conditions include properties of persons as well as properties of their environments. The circumstances are indicated by contexts in which individuals of roughly similar powers live together in time and space; where they are vulnerable to having their plans blocked by others. They are contexts where people’s needs and interests are similar or complementary enough to make mutually advantageous cooperation possible. But they are also different enough to result in different ends and purposes and “conflicting claims on the natural and social resources

20 But a similar point can be made of forms of sufficientarianism that accept either satiable values or satiable principles. See Nielsen (2019).

21 Thanks to Dick Timmer for discussions on this point. See also his discussions in Timmer (2021b and 2022).

22 See also Hume (2000, 3.2.2.2–3, 3.2.2.16) and Hume (1998, 3.1.12, 3.1.18, 3.8–9). There are debates about what exactly Rawls adds or changes from Hume. See, e.g., Hope (2010). For broader discussions, see also Barry (1989), Nussbaum (2006), Vanderschraaf (2006), and Tebble (2020).

available" (Rawls 1999, p 110). Moreover, people are always operating with limited knowledge, where bias and distortion are common. Perhaps most importantly for our discussion, they are conditions of moderate scarcity of resources. As Rawls puts it,

Natural and other resources are not so abundant that schemes of cooperation become superfluous, nor are conditions so harsh that fruitful ventures must inevitably break down. While mutually advantageous arrangements are feasible, the benefits they yield fall short of the demands men put forward.²³

What I want to suggest is that the very fact of being in the circumstances of justice, and therefore for any sufficientarian thesis to apply, itself may imply a tacit commitment to a limitarian thesis. Why would this be true?

There is an obvious sense in which the condition of moderate scarcity implies some collective limits.²⁴ But as a descriptive matter, this is not yet interestingly normative in the way the limitarian thesis is meant, which purports to go beyond a mere general description of collectively finite resources. In order to count as normative, in the relevant sense, there has to be the possibility of failing to live up to the standards of the norm.

The route from the basic fact of finite resources to a properly normative limitarian thesis can go a number of different ways. One way is defending a normative threshold that is short of the finite physical limits.²⁵ For example, consider climate change, where the (normative) limit of fossil fuels we can permissibly collectively burn is lower than the (descriptive) limit of all existing fossil fuel reserves we could burn because of the various destructive consequences of doing so.²⁶

23 See Rawls' full presentation at (1999, pp. 109–110). Hume thought that either extreme "abundance" or scarcity/"necessity" (on the environmental side), or perfect "moderation and humanity" or "rapaciousness and malice" (on the psychological side) would make justice useless, (1998, 9 3.1.12). It is common, then, to summarize the circumstances of justice as circumstances of *limited altruism* and *moderate scarcity of resources*.

24 Naturally, these might be affected somewhat by technology, efficiency, etc., which I will say more about below.

25 While I won't pursue the point here, as it would take us too far into the weeds about the concept and logic of normativity, it is worth entertaining whether simply conjoining the facts of finite resources with a demonstration that our collective desires outstrip their possibilities is enough to provide a sufficiently normative thesis insofar as how staying within the confines of finite physical resources will be *received psychologically*.

26 This is, indeed, one of the reasons why Robeyns defends limitarianism. See (2019, pp. 258–260).

Another, and more universal, way to bridge the descriptive fact of finite resources to an appropriately normative limitarian thesis is in the move from a collective limit to matters of distribution and individual rights, permissions, and entitlements. For example, perhaps it is permissible to collectively use all of the world's finite supply of some resource, but as long as we care at all about how that use is distributed (which the sufficientarian necessarily does), the non-normative finite collective limit will imply normative individual limits as participants, shareholders, users, etc. To see this point schematically, imagine a world with 10 people and 30 resource units. Suppose, per sufficientarianism, everyone is entitled to 2 units. By implication there is a meaningful upper normative limit for any individual at (at most) 12 units (2 from their sufficiency entitlement and potentially 10 from the surplus after everyone else secures their sufficiency entitlement). The precise individual limits that are implied as a matter of distribution from collective limits in relation to sufficientarian guarantees are, of course, up for debate. They may not be the limits that would be associated with a claim to an equal share. They may not be the limits Robeyns identified in coining "limitarianism," which target resources beyond what is necessary for a flourishing life.²⁷ But as long as we are concerned with some kind of fair share distribution that limits individuals to some non-exclusive share or another, the logic of a meaningful limitarian thesis is inevitable; to steal a phrase, it's just the price that we're haggling over (i.e., where the limitarian threshold is set). So regardless of how that debate is settled, I want to suggest that the collective limits inherent to being in the circumstances of justice imply some meaningfully normative individual limits. That may be enough, consistent with the spirit of the category, to show that the sufficientarian must also be committed to a limitarian thesis, under some description.²⁸

This would be true unless through cooperation we can somehow overcome the conditions of moderate scarcity in a way that relaxes such distributive norms, which does not seem plausible for at least three reasons. First, empirically, the scale at which people's valuable needs

27 In fact, I discuss below some reasons why we might ultimately think that individual limits are actually *lower* than the point of flourishing.

28 I will say something below about the possibility that the general structural form of a limitarian thesis that might fall out of this isn't substantive enough to count as *meaningfully* limitarian.

remain unmet is truly massive.²⁹ Second, the way we conceive of scarcity in the circumstances of justice is also determined by the vast depths of human desire and imagination, as well as recognizing inevitable competition for status and positional goods, which together are likely to provide inexhaustible sources of want that inevitably outstrip what is made possible by our resources (even as they grow through cooperation, technology, efficiency gains, etc.). Third, even if cooperation is somehow sufficient to produce enough surplus to end conditions of moderate scarcity, it is not clear that this should license a relaxation of distributive norms such that it eliminates at least some meaningful limitarian thesis (rather than merely indicating the limit should be slightly higher). Doing so would seem to undermine the conditions of success and therefore the stability of being without moderate scarcity. Put more conceptually, it would be strange if justice working well could remove us from the circumstances of justice. It would seem more appropriate to me, in such a successful case of cooperation, to say we would have realized justice, with an imperative to preserve it, or adjust upward its ambitions.³⁰

Attending more carefully, then, to the circumstances of justice may plausibly require the sufficientarian to accept a meaningfully limitarian thesis. But before moving to the next section, there is a broader point to be made. Some of the arguments used to motivate sufficientarianism, or criticize egalitarian or prioritarian thinking, are worth reconsidering in the context of thinking about the circumstances of justice. For instance, Roger Crisp famously uses his “Beverly Hills case” to suggest that if choosing between a group of rich and super-rich people for whom to offer fine wine, it would be “absurd” to necessarily require prioritizing the merely rich, just because they are worse off. Once individuals are

29 The status of this claim might depend on exactly how global the scope of principles of distributive justice is. It is more plausible that some individual societies might be able to eliminate, within their ranks, extreme want and thereby “moderate scarcity.” Often, of course, affluent societies that might look closer to having eliminated moderate scarcity simply offload the costs and hide the negative externalities elsewhere. That is a common motivation for wanting a picture of distributive justice that is global in scope. Moreover, any of this depends on how precisely we interpret what “moderate scarcity” consists in. All of that said, I am confident enough in the case for a global scope of justice that if my argument here is restricted to global views, I would not be upset. In my view, that would merely amount to a restriction to the right set of views anyway.

30 That is, it might position us to revise upward our judgments about what justice demands to situate us back in a newly conceived context of moderate scarcity; a rung higher up on the ladder.

above a certain level, he suggests, “any prioritarian concern for them disappears entirely” (Crisp 2003a, p. 755).

But there is a real issue for this kind of argument that is exposed when viewed in the context of the circumstances of justice. Namely, it is not clear why we should take Crisp’s intuition as pointing against equality or priority views in favour of sufficiency views, rather than simply indicating that the world he is considering is not operating in the circumstances of justice at all! To do the work he wants, the intuition relies on an implicit assumption that it is in the circumstances of justice and the prioritarian or egalitarian would be committed to giving the wine to the rich group rather than the super-rich group. But it is not clear that that is a legitimate assumption. This is a slippery move that happens often in the literature. The world in which our choice is between giving wine to the rich or super-rich is decidedly not one of moderate scarcity, which is the condition for the application of principles of justice.³¹ And there is a reasonable case to be made that this is what explains Crisp’s intuition, more than any necessary advantage of the sufficientarian.

Obviously, given my project here, this isn’t to cast doubt on the sufficientarian. But it is to highlight another way in which attending to the circumstances of justice in our arguments in this domain is crucially important. In particular, this is worth remarking on because this is the same type of argument that might be lodged against a sufficientarian adopting a companion limitarian thesis. For example, could we really justify redistributing the wine from the super-rich just above the limitarian threshold to the merely rich just below (when both are “above a certain level”)? The intuition that we might not be able to justify such a redistribution could only serve as an objection to the idea that sufficientarians should also embrace limitarianism if limitarianism was committed to such redistributions. But it isn’t and needn’t be.³² In fact, a more plausible explanation for the force of the intuition that we don’t need to redistribute in this way is precisely because the case as described in the thought experiment falls outside of the circumstances of justice (where the limitarian thesis applies), rather than indicating

31 Crisp himself, in responding to criticisms from Larry Temkin, makes clear that he is thinking of this case not as possible states of affairs of some rich people in our world, but a totally independent, fully-described possible world. See Crisp (2003b, p. 121). See also Temkin (2003).

32 See Robeyns (2022), responding to Huseby (2022) in a dynamic that played out in just this manner.

some problem with the limitarian thesis itself. In this way, attending to the circumstances of justice is also important as we evaluate the success of specific arguments and thought experiments regarding distributive justice.

The broader ‘circumstances of justice’ argument that the sufficientarian must also embrace a limitarian thesis is admittedly challenging.³³ Recall, I have tried to be ecumenical about the form of sufficientarian and limitarian thesis. One might think, however, that even if there are necessarily limits, in order to count as meaningfully limitarian, the thesis would have to have more defined content than what limits could potentially fall out of this “circumstances of justice” argument. Or that the justification for the limit must be of a certain shape. It is hard to see any principled reason to believe this, without knowing more about the aggregate limits and what is demanded by the sufficiency threshold, but I do not have space to fully consider this possibility. However, it is worth situating that potential doubt in the broader discussion, because it wouldn’t cast doubt on the overall thesis, just on the idea that it would be a necessary claim. So, while I believe this argument is certainly worth entertaining, if it is ultimately unconvincing, I will be content to leave this section with a set of arguments from above to at least suggest that there are strong reasons in favour of sufficientarians also endorsing a limitarian thesis.

3. Should Limitarians Also Be Sufficientarians? Must They?

In the previous section, I considered whether sufficientarians should (or even must) also endorse a limitarian thesis, making the case that they indeed should. In this section, I proceed from the other direction to consider whether limitarians should (or even must) also endorse a sufficientarian thesis. Similarly, I conclude that they should. I again entertain a speculative argument for a conceptually necessary connection. And while it is debatable whether they must necessarily do so, in principle, any plausible and well-motivated limitarianism will.

³³ Indeed, some might worry it proves too much because it would entail that any view of distributive justice should embrace limitarianism. This, of course, isn’t an outcome that I’d be unhappy with. I have focused on the comparison because the views are seen as mirror images of each other.

Unlike sufficientarianism, limitarianism was never formulated with a symmetrical “negative” thesis, so there is not a similar initial worry that would rule out the limitarian’s adoption of an additional sufficientarian thesis. So, we can move directly to the positive reasons in favour of so doing.

3.1 The Positive Case in Favour

The main reason why limitarians should also be sufficientarians becomes clear when we consider the most plausible kinds of arguments on offer for the limitarian thesis itself. Those very arguments rely on robustly sufficientarian reasoning. The limitarian takes advantage of how hard it is to dislodge the intuitions at the core of sufficientarianism; tracing the particular moral importance of securing certain basic goods to the idea that some excess resource holdings which *compete* with them are unjustifiable.

There are two chief arguments that have been advanced in favour of limitarianism, which we can summarize as follows:

The Argument from Urgent Unmet Needs (UUN)—There are morally urgent unmet needs which could be eliminated via redistribution of resources from the extremely wealthy. Meeting such needs would come at the cost of significantly less morally important values from those above the limitarian threshold in the process.³⁴

The Democratic Argument (DA)—Extreme wealth undermines core democratic values and rights to political equality. The affluent are able to convert their economic power into political power and skew nominally democratic processes toward their interests (via campaign and Super PAC spending, lobbying, gatekeeping, media access, agenda setting, think tanks, etc.). This strips lower earners of the real value of their democratic participation (Robeyns 2017, pp. 6–10; Christiano 2012).

34 In Robeyns’ original formulation, which places the limitarian threshold at riches above those required for flourishing, she claims that there is actually no moral cost to such redistribution, “since surplus money does not contribute to people’s flourishing, it has zero moral weight, and it would be unreasonable to reject the principle that we ought to use that money to meet these urgent unmet needs.” (p. 12) One need not agree with the idea that they have zero moral weight to feel the force of the comparative claim that holding on to such resources would be impermissible and can legitimately be redistributed.

Each of these arguments derives its force from a concern that can be (at least partially) put in terms of sufficientarian language (admittedly the first is easier than the second). The reason why luxury resources or extreme wealth should be capped and redistributed, according to UUN, is precisely because of the moral importance of raising people above a certain standard and eliminating unmet urgent need.³⁵ Recall the statement of the sufficientarian's positive thesis from above, which highlights the particularly weighty reasons we have to ensure that people secure enough of some goods.³⁶ The way in which DA can be seen as potentially embracing a sufficientarian thesis is perhaps more obscure because on its surface it is about "political equality." However, it is not uncommon for sufficientarians to think that for some goods the sufficientarian threshold that is called for is also an egalitarian demand. Sometimes having enough means having an equal share. This is particularly clear when considering political rights such as voting. Having one vote clearly isn't enough if others have ten (and of course, even if one has equal formal voting rights, disproportionate hurdles to exercising the vote, or inequality shaping the political agenda, might also reveal insufficient political representation or participation). While the limitarian's exact commitments with respect to political equality are up for debate, what is clear from DA is that extreme wealth means that some people have too much political power and, in virtue of that excess, given its positional nature, others have too little to be consistent with democratic values. That can reasonably be understood as a sufficientarian concern, such that sufficient political power for all, to whatever extent the limitarian ultimately thinks that actually needs

35 As hinted above, a third argument is that such limits are required to stave off environmental catastrophe owing to the disproportionate and unsustainable consumption of the rich. See again Robeyns (2019), pp. 258–260. See also Hickey (2021). For other, more methodological, ways of defending limitarianism drawing on this basis, see Timmer (2021a).

36 An implication of the shift thesis is perhaps somewhat less explicit, but in the very act of singling out urgent unmet needs the argument seems to be implying that the reasons we have for eliminating those are particularly strong and different from other kinds of reasons one could claim for redistribution. While meeting unmet urgent needs might not signify yet that someone has "enough," the unique way in which it stands as the justification of the limitarian threshold suggests the logic of sufficientarian and shift-based thinking.

to be equalized, requires limiting wealth and its attending political influence accordingly.

Both of the core arguments for limitarianism, UUN and DA respectively, can be understood as embracing the essence of (or at least implicating a form of) sufficientarianism, at least within the scope of the domain to which the limitarian thesis is meant to apply. It seems, then, that denying some version of sufficientarian thesis would be unmotivated and self-undermining for the limitarian.

3.2 The Necessity Claim

While the two main arguments that have been used to advance limitarianism seem to imply a commitment to sufficientarian logic in order to justify the proposed limit, there are other arguments one could give for adopting limitarianism. Both UUN and DA are other-regarding reasons for limitarianism, but one could also provide self-regarding reasons. For instance, perhaps extreme wealth, resources, goods, etc., reduce one's own autonomy, or are intrinsically bad or corrupting of spirit.³⁷ So it is, in principle, possible to reject the force of the UUN and DA (and their inferred commitment to a sufficientarian thesis) while still endorsing limitarianism. However, doing so seems particularly ill-considered. It is very hard to see how a self-regarding or intrinsic argument for limitarianism would be more plausible than UUN or DA, which would be required in order to defeat the case for limitarians also endorsing a sufficientarian thesis. If there is any role for these kinds of self-regarding or intrinsic arguments, it is likely to be as *additional* supporting arguments to strengthen the limitarian case beyond UUN and DA; almost certainly not *replacement* arguments. In so far as that is

37 Zwarthoed (2018), for instance suggests extreme wealth might hinder the development of deliberative capacities, facilitate problematic adaptive preference formation, erode one's capacity to revise their conception of the good (because it habituates one to an expensive lifestyle, or irresistibly triggers fears of status loss), or be incompatible with an important form of transparency with one's own values. Though one could potentially transform this argument into a "sufficientarian" form by appealing to a sufficient threshold of autonomy that everyone is entitled to, and suggesting that having excess wealth pushes people below that threshold. Doing so would bolster the necessity claim by including these self-regarding reasons for limitarianism in a sufficientarian logic.

true, the necessity of endorsing a sufficientarian thesis, for the limitarian, is fairly secure (even if not a strict logical necessity).

But there is one other argument about why it might be *required* for limitarians to also endorse a sufficientarian thesis that I want to explore. It brings us back to the “circumstance of justice” that I suggested might have a role in securing the addition of a limitarian thesis for the sufficientarian. There is a related argument that can apply in this direction as well, for the limitarian to adopt a sufficientarian thesis.

Return to the basic idea that the “circumstances of justice” are meant to mark out the “conditions under which human cooperation is both possible and necessary.” What would make cooperation “necessary”? It could be read as a mere descriptive fact set by temporal and geographic cohabitation. On the other hand, one could argue that the most plausible interpretation of what is meant by cooperation in the circumstances of justice being “necessary” is already a normative phenomenon. On this account, the necessity is that there already exists an implied intolerability of at least some people falling below some standard that such cooperation is meant to correct. If true, it would suggest that inherent to the very idea of being in the circumstances of justice is a kernel of the sufficientarian logic. This result of such an interpretation of the circumstances of justice would, of course, bolster the position of the sufficientarian in the landscape of distributive justice, and be an important indicator of the foundational status of sufficientarian intuitions.³⁸ But it would also have implications for limitarianism (and perhaps any theory of distributive justice).

To make it explicit: in order for limitarianism to hold, we have to be in the circumstances of justice. But if the very fact of being in those circumstances of justice entails a sufficientarian thesis (under some description, as the truth-maker of the claim that cooperation is “necessary”), then the limitarian also has to be committed to a sufficientarian thesis. It may not be precisely the same thesis as some sufficientarians might try to defend, but it seems sufficientarian in a non-trivial sense.

³⁸ Again, some might worry that this proves too much because it would entail that every theory of distributive justice should also be sufficientarian. For me, this is a welcome outcome, and it is interesting that it would emerge from a discussion about its relation to limitarianism.

Again, I am trying to be ecumenical about the specific form of the sufficientarian and limitarian theses. However, parallel to the worry I raised in the other direction above, that might come at a cost. One might think that in order to count as *meaningfully sufficientarian*, the thesis would need more defined content or necessarily be a higher threshold than what could potentially fall out of this “circumstances of justice” argument.³⁹ As before, I can’t fully consider this point, and don’t want too much to rest on this speculative argument. It may be too quick and easy to possibly be true, but its failure wouldn’t undermine the general case in favour of conjoining limitarianism with sufficientarianism. So, while it is certainly worth entertaining, we should be content to move from this broader section with a very strong argument for limitarians in favour of also endorsing a sufficientarian thesis, even if the case for a conceptual necessity on the basis of the circumstances of justice is not airtight (at least not for some specific and more robust interpretations of what the sufficientarian threshold would have to look like to count in the right way).

4. Distributive Justice and Multi-Threshold Views

I have attempted to argue in the previous two sections, first, that sufficientarians should also endorse a limitarian thesis, and second, that limitarians should also endorse a sufficientarian thesis. At a higher level of abstraction, this implies that each view should actually be a *multi-threshold* theory of distributive justice, consisting of both a sufficientarian threshold and a limitarian threshold. We can also refer to these as a “floor” threshold and a “ceiling” threshold, or a “lower” threshold and an “upper” threshold.

This multi-threshold structure is worth distinguishing from another kind of “multi-threshold” view that has surfaced in the sufficientarian literature. Robert Huseby has presented a sufficientarian view which also articulates two thresholds, what he calls a “minimal” and a

39 Even if many sufficientarians focus on the importance for justice of securing “basic needs” for all, which might be minimal enough for this argument to work, it might not, for instance, establish the threshold of contentment that Frankfurt discusses, or the threshold of enjoying “freedom from duress” that Axelsen and Nielsen defend (2015). This result, of course, would not rule out the limitarian adopting one of these richer sufficientarian thresholds, it just might not fall out as necessary from this ‘circumstances of justice’ argument. It may fall out of UUN or DA.

“maximal” threshold. However, these function as two different kinds of *sufficiency* thresholds with more or less inclusive content. One highlights the importance of securing everyone’s basic needs, as a foundational threshold. The other highlights the importance of securing a state of contentment as a more involved demand of sufficientarian justice (Huseby 2010).⁴⁰

For the purposes of this chapter, I am non-committal as to whether or not we should endorse these two sufficientarian thresholds, or whether there may be arguments for multiple limitarian thresholds where our reasons shift in character.⁴¹ The key takeaway is in the general structure; that there is good reason to think that sufficientarians and limitarians should each endorse at least two thresholds, one at the floor and one at the ceiling. Any additional thresholds, of Huseby’s variety or otherwise, can be put up for debate.⁴²

Moreover, although this may sound strange, in particular contexts the lower threshold and the upper threshold might collapse into one another and share the same value. As I said above, it is not remarkable for sufficientarians to maintain that for some goods what counts as enough is equality. At the level of normative action-guidance the multi-threshold view in such contexts would be indistinguishable from the egalitarian, but preserve the modal flexibility across different possibility space where the thresholds intuitively should come apart.⁴³

5. Distributive Thresholds and Deontic Statuses

In this section, I want to show why the multi-level threshold structure I have just articulated should actually be less surprising once we consider it in relation to other domains of normativity. In fact, once alerted to how neatly the core idea maps on to other very standard deontic conceptual language about *rights, permissions, and duties*, conjoining the idea of a

40 These are different than the two thresholds mentioned above during the discussion of the positive and negative theses from Huseby’s more recent work (2020).

41 If we proliferate too many thresholds there is a risk of diluting the meaning of a threshold and veering closer to general prioritarian reasoning, but I don’t think that is a particular risk here.

42 For instance, again, like those in Benbaji (2005; 2006).

43 I take it that this potential to capture egalitarian intuitions, without sharing the same vulnerabilities, is a theoretical advantage.

sufficientarian and a limitarian threshold in a single view shouldn't seem strange at all. Indeed, perhaps it should seem rather obvious.

Triangulating across different normative language, the sufficiency threshold is essentially meant to indicate what people can claim as a matter of right or entitlement. The space between the sufficiency threshold and the limitarian threshold essentially indicates the range of permissible resource holdings that cannot be claimed as a matter of entitlement but which are also not wrong to have. And the limitarian threshold, as an upper limit on permissible resource holdings, is the point past which any such holdings are illegitimate. It is where permission runs out, and thus where wrongdoing begins and duties to disgorge come in to force.⁴⁴

If we wanted to represent the conceptual space visually, we might have something like the following (Figure 1):



Fig. 1 Distributive Holdings

The structure inherent in the multi-threshold view is essentially the structure that undergirds all of our deontic discourse. Namely, it is one that marries rights or entitlements with permissions and non-permissions or

44 In a different literature and for slightly different purposes, Ian Gough (2017) has described an analogous idea as a "consumption corridor" as the range "between minimum standards, allowing every individual to live a good life, and maximum standards, ensuring a limit on every individual's use of natural and social resources in order to guarantee a good life for others in the present and in the future." See also Raworth (2017).

prohibitions.⁴⁵ For different purposes, one might want to interpret these three categories morally instead of politically. For instance, one might think that one is morally entitled to more or less than one is politically entitled to, or that the moral limits on resource holdings are more or less stringent than what is defensible or enforceable as a political limit. But regardless of the specific kind of deontic interpretation one wishes to give, what remains for the multi-threshold view is a very familiar structure. This should give us additional confidence that the outcome of endorsing a multi-threshold view, rather than being seen as strange or unique, should be welcomed as a sign of fluency in deontic discourse, of which distributive justice purports to be a part.

I should clarify one last point, before moving on to the final section of the chapter. Embracing this continuity between standard deontic language and the multi-threshold view is consistent with distinctions about varying “degrees of wrongness” or intra-category comparative prioritization. For instance, having a limitarian threshold doesn’t preclude judgments that it is more wrong to hoard a billion dollars than it is to hoard a million and one dollars, if the threshold were set at one million. The threshold simply indicates a shift in normative status from permission to non-permission. So, while both hoarders might be in violation of their duties, it is coherent to say that the billionaire is doing significantly worse. Indeed, part of the very explanation for why is the comparatively greater amount of other, more important normative values that could be satisfied with alternative usage of the billionaire’s surplus resources.

6. The Looming Question

My core ambition in this chapter has been to suggest that sufficientarians should endorse a limitarian thesis and limitarians should endorse a sufficientarian thesis, and thus both should be multi-threshold views. In some ways this leaves, of course, the biggest question still to be answered; how should we interpret the substantive, and therefore deontic, content of the thresholds? Where are they to be set? More

⁴⁵ Of course, there are other ways to justify non-permissions, like if someone steals from another, so I don’t want to imply that this simple representation covers all of the deontic landscape.

than the mere structure, this is what is ultimately required to provide action guidance from a theory of distributive justice. I will not attempt to provide a convincing answer here, but by way of closing remarks, I want to offer a few thoughts toward that ultimate end.

First, as an important reminder, it is possible that different kinds of goods which are implicated as matters of concern in our theorizing about distributive justice may indeed, if pluralistic and irreducible, require discrete treatment when it comes to threshold setting.

Second, any adequate approach (or, ultimately, answer) to the question of threshold setting will need to involve high-bandwidth feedback between a range of foundational values and the relevant empirical context. For instance, we need to know the state of our collective resources and what is and is not attainable with them. My own view is that the limitarian threshold needs to be determined in relation to the sufficientarian threshold (see, e.g., Hickey 2021). So, in order to determine how high our distributive permissions go, we need to begin with what, at the low end, are plausibly specified as entitlements. I presume that will start with the most uncontroversial and minimalist proposals for entitlements, such as the concern for securing basic needs and subsistence. From there, we might extend to an expanded concern for securing a sphere of the goods of agency.⁴⁶ Beyond that, we might perhaps move up another rung to an expanded concern for securing what Frankfurt (1987) or Huseby (2010) refer to as “contentment.” Beyond that still, we might perhaps ultimately extend to a concern for securing what Robeyns indicates in her deployment of the concept of “flourishing.”

There are inevitably robust arguments to be had about what plausibly constitutes an entitlement, and in turn how to specify what the limitarian threshold needs to be. However, one thing that does seem to be true is that the most troublesome conflicts do not begin to arise until we place the limitarian threshold low enough to start seriously cutting into individuals’ contentment or flourishing. As long as we are still in the business of cutting into mere luxuries of the wealthy, isn’t plausible to think that their own entitlements could block redistribution towards the more basic entitlements of the worse off.

46 Perhaps like the “autonomy-catering” sufficientarian threshold proposed by Axelsen and Nielsen (2015).

That said, in the real world, it may very well be that the most defensible upper limit is lower than we might think. It is possible that it could substantially cut into what we generally think of as permissible holdings or even entitlements, as part of our contentment or flourishing (see again Hickey 2021). In spite of real gains lifting millions out of abject poverty in recent years, the magnitude of suffering and urgent unmet needs around the globe is staggering. Put in terms of the deontic language just introduced, there is a virtually unending glut of the most basic rights and entitlements that are unfulfilled. Moreover, as we continue to address the cumulative costs of the pandemic, worsening climate change, deadly wars and conflicts, broader political unrest, etc., the prospects for further deterioration are high. Given the above, it might turn out that taking the moral equality of persons seriously will ultimately point to a lower upper limit than we may have imagined.

Moreover, this same set of facts may also reveal that what one is entitled (or permitted) to have may fall well short of what would actually be required for a flourishing life.⁴⁷ Naturally, this depends on how minimalist one's (personal or theoretical) conception of flourishing is. But it is safe to say that many visions outstrip what is likely to survive as a permissible distributive share when taking the scope of global basic needs seriously. Neither of these speculative thoughts is meant as a matter of principle, but rather a worried reflection on the fundamentally and unacceptably dire state of many billions of people around the globe who can all likely claim more plausible entitlements to distributive resources for basic needs than others can in service of providing the material conditions necessary for, say, contentment, flourishing, or luxury.

As with many philosophical projects, then, we are left with substantial questions. Defining the contours of the most plausible thresholds for any resulting multi-threshold view is chief among them. What I hope to have shown here, in arguing that sufficientarians should endorse a limitarian thesis and limitarians should endorse a sufficientarian thesis, is just that as they forge ahead in detailing the content of distributive justice, they should be looking in two directions, at (at least) two thresholds.

47 On the difficulties of securing a good life for all within planetary boundaries, see O'Neill et al. (2018).

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10. A Neo-Republican Argument for Limitarianism

Elena Icardi

1. Introduction

Initially put forward by Philip Pettit (1997), freedom as non-domination represents the core ideal of neo-republicanism.¹ Under this construal, being free from domination means not being exposed to anyone else's capacity to interfere without being able to control it—both vis-à-vis fellow citizens and vis-à-vis the state (Pettit, 2012). With respect to the latter, freedom as non-domination entails that each citizen should enjoy an equal opportunity for political influence.

This requirement appears to be jeopardized by the presence of very wealthy citizens in a democracy (McCormick, 2011; 2019). The super-rich enjoy extra chances because they are able, for instance, to unfairly invest in political campaigns and/or influence public opinion by funding social media, think-tanks and so on (Christiano 2012; Cagé 2018). They also have independent power, both in the economic sphere (Christiano 2010; 2012; see also Knight & Johnson 1997) and in the shape of social capital (Robeyns 2017; see also Timmer 2019), which allows them to

1 By “neo-republicanism”, I mean the strand in contemporary political philosophy which has revived the republican tradition as an alternative to mainstream liberal thought, with freedom as non-domination being its core ideal as opposed to freedom as non-interference (Skinner 1984; Pettit 1997). Although several thinkers refer to it simply as “republicanism”—Dumitru (2020) is one of them—I prefer to use “neo-republicanism” to avoid any confusion with the republican tradition itself and to indicate such a specific contemporary stance.

have an impact on public decision-making even though they do not really invest in it.

Furthermore, this power can only be limited in a minimal way by formal institutional constraints (Christiano 2010; 2012; Robeyns 2017). When some people possess so much more wealth than others that they have access to the above-mentioned privileges, formal barriers can indeed do little to prevent this. In this respect, it seems to me that rather than endorsing procedural solutions for protecting democracy from the domination of the wealthy, as neo-republicans have generally done (e.g., McCormick 2011), substantive limitations should be envisaged.²

Limitarianism, as recently advanced by Ingrid Robeyns (2017), could provide neo-republicanism with such limitations. According to Robeyns, excessive individual wealth should be restrained, and one of the reasons she offers for doing so is to safeguard the democratic process. There thus seems to be a *prima facie* case for why limitarianism would be beneficial to neo-republicanism.³ We should ask, therefore, whether it can be argued that if one supports freedom as non-domination, one should endorse a limitarian threshold. And if so, what forms this threshold should take, and why.

In what follows I argue that limitarianism should indeed be advocated within neo-republicanism. Since (a) freedom as non-domination is grounded on citizens having an equal opportunity for political influence, and (b) given both the disproportionate influence of the wealthy and the insufficiency of formal constraints, this equality of opportunity can only exist if excessive individual wealth is limited, (c) freedom as non-domination requires excessive individual wealth to be limited, and this task can be achieved by setting a limitarian threshold. My view of this threshold, however, is different to that of the first

2 Note that a growing focus on substantive proposals has made its way into the neo-republican panorama—see, for example, Richard Dagger’s *civic economy* (2006), Stuart White’s analysis of property-owning democracy (2016), and Tom O’Shea’s *socialist republicanism* (2020). Yet the question of whether they stand as alternative or complementary proposals and which one better suits neo-republicanism goes beyond the scope of this chapter. It seems to me that the answer to these questions would not negate any aspect of the thesis that it is worth adding limitarianism to the neo-republican toolkit.

3 Casassas and De Wispelaere (2016) already enumerate limitarianism as one of the ways in which neo-republicans could set an economic ceiling to prevent the wealthy from having too much political power. Nevertheless, they do not explore this option in depth.

advocate of republican limitarianism, Adelin-Costin Dumitru (2020). In my opinion, such a threshold should limit the resources people need to have disproportionate opportunities for political influence, instead of withdrawing only the resources that people do not need to fully flourish. That is to say, the limit should be put at the level at which the wealthy dominate the public decision-making process by enjoying the above-mentioned privileges. This chapter argues in favour of this kind of limitarian threshold.

To do so, the chapter is organized as follows. First, I analyse the reasons why freedom as non-domination requires excessive individual wealth to be limited. Second, I argue that, despite the fact that freedom as non-domination requires excessive individual wealth to be limited and this task can be achieved through limitarianism, a limitarian threshold grounded in the idea of full flourishing does not suit this task. Finally, I discuss a different kind of threshold, which is independent of the value of flourishing and which I claim to be a precondition of the democratic requirement grounding neo-republican freedom.

2. Neo-Republicanism and the Problem of Elites

To understand why neo-republicanism requires excessive individual wealth to be limited, let us introduce, first of all, the idea of freedom as non-domination. It is well known that freedom as non-domination was first described by Philip Pettit in his *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (1997) and was then developed in later works, such as *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (2012).

According to Pettit's account of republicanism, a person is free from domination when she is not exposed to anyone else's arbitrary power (Pettit 1997). Formulated differently, she is not dominated when she is not exposed to anyone else's uncontrolled capacity to interfere with her choices (Pettit 2012).⁴ Notice that interference itself is not necessary for domination to occur. What matters is the *capacity* to interfere that is grounded in the asymmetry of power that people acknowledge exists

4 Pettit replaces the term "arbitrary" (1997) with the word "uncontrolled" (2012) as an explicit attempt to avoid having "misleading connotations" or "a value-dependent or moralized term" in his definition (Pettit 2012, p. 58). Nonetheless, the word "uncontrolled" should not be understood as having a substantially different meaning from "arbitrary", so I use them interchangeably in this chapter.

among them. To clarify this point, Pettit suggests the well known image of what he calls “the slave of a kindly master” (Pettit 1997, p. 35)—I will use the term enslaved person and enslaver in what follows. Even if by being “benign and permissive” (Pettit 1997, p. 32) the enslaver does not directly intervene in the enslaved person’s life and allows them to do whatever they want, the enslaved person remains dominated given that the enslaver can hinder their life at any time and that they have no control over this. It is such an uncontrolled capacity to interfere, i.e., the possibility of choosing whether to interfere or not and how to do so, rather than interference itself, that should be ruled out.

People should therefore be protected from such an uncontrolled capacity to interfere if they are to be free from domination. That is, individuals should be secured a position as equals so that they can “look others in the eye without reason for the fear or deference that a power of interference might inspire” (Pettit 2012, p. 84).⁵ They should be granted an equal status by the state for this purpose. To avoid the state’s interferences from being a source of domination themselves, though, another requirement must be added: people should not only be granted an equal status to one another (horizontal non-domination), but they should also enjoy control over the government’s decisions (vertical non-domination).⁶ This form of shared control is in itself justifiable by neo-republicanism, since “if the citizenry control state discretion in a suitable manner [...] then the imposition of a social order on those citizens will not take away from their freedom” (Pettit 2012, p. 160).

But what does citizenry controlling the state mean? In Pettit’s terms, having control means both having “some influence over the process leading to the result” and using that influence “to impose a relevant direction on the process” (Pettit 2012, p. 153). Therefore, first of all, citizens controlling the state means that each citizen should have an equal influence on governmental decisions. However, this cannot entail that each citizen should participate equally in the public decision-making process (Pettit 2012, p. 169), nor that each citizen should have the same probability of success in influencing it (Scanlon 2018, p. 80). For example, citizens might have a different level of willingness to take part in politics

5 This is the so-called “eyeball test” (Pettit 2012).

6 Both what Pettit calls *dominium* (i.e., the horizontal dependency on fellows) and what he defines as *imperium* (i.e., the vertical imposition of the governmental will) would hence be prevented (Pettit 1997, p. 36).

or have different abilities as orators, and such factors should not be seen as undermining the neo-republican principle of equal influence.

What equally shared influence requires, therefore, can only be equal access to the system of popular influence: an opportunity for participation in that system that is available with equal ease to each citizen (Pettit 2012, p. 169).

In other words, if citizens are to have control over the public decision-making process, each citizen should have an equal opportunity to influence it.⁷

While people being granted an equal status to one another is a matter of social justice, this requirement of having an equal opportunity to influence politics is a matter of political legitimacy. Moreover, on Pettit's account, these two domains seem to stand in a hierarchical relationship: political legitimacy comes first, and social justice comes second (Pettit 2012, pp. 24–25; pp. 130–132). If citizens do not enjoy equal opportunities to influence the law-making process, their horizontal equal status will be arbitrary as well because they will be surrounded by laws over which they do not have true control. In Pettit's words:

A failure in political legitimacy would compromise the robustness of freedom more deeply than a failure only in social justice. Where a lack of social justice alone would make us vulnerable only to our fellow citizens, a lack of political legitimacy would make us vulnerable on two fronts (Pettit 2012, p. 24).

When citizens cannot control public decisions, they are dominated in both the vertical and the horizontal sense.

Citizens might, for instance, be treated as equals by their queen, thus experiencing an equal status to one another, but if they do not enjoy any opportunity to take part in the queen's decision-making process concerning public matters, such an equality of status will only occur if she has enough goodwill to allow it. In that case, they will be exposed not only to the actual vertical domination of their queen but also to the potential horizontal domination of their fellows, since their equal status to one another could change at any time depending on the queen's

⁷ See also Poama and Volacu (2021) for a similar conceptualization of equal opportunity for political influence. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this text to me.

arbitrium. As this example illustrates, horizontal non-domination thus cannot be robustly secured without vertical non-domination being secured first. Although it is important that citizens are treated as equals by the state, what matters the most for neo-republicans seems to be that citizens enjoy control over the state's choices. In this respect, political legitimacy should be considered to be the prior condition if freedom as non-domination is to be ensured (Pansardi 2015).

Yet such a prior condition is jeopardized by the presence of economic elites in a democracy. Although Pettit seems to overlook this problem, John P. McCormick has recently stressed it, noting that

historical and empirical research affords us ample evidence to suggest that the wealthy have always been, and invariably will continue to be, an imminently dominating force within democracies (McCormick 2019, p. 127).

Contemporary democracies show clear proof of this by being generally biased towards the interests of the wealthy.⁸ However, since McCormick believes that people should be left free to run their own business(es), thus accumulating different amounts of wealth, he addresses the issue of the wealthy dominating democracy by focusing on redrawing the democratic procedure itself rather than on limiting their riches.⁹ By contrast, in my view, the threat posed by economic elites cannot be procedurally thwarted, because very rich people seem to enjoy a disproportionate political influence (Scanlon 2018, p. 82) that evades formal institutional constraints.

This happens for two reasons. On the one hand, wealth represents a proxy that can be used to gain extra opportunities to influence politics. Economic resources can be translated into political influence through several different mechanisms, which can be both direct, for example financing political campaigns, and indirect, for instance funding social media platforms and/or think-tanks so as to impact public opinion and/

8 For empirical studies see, for instance, Gilens (2005); Bartels (2008); Gilens & Page (2014); Piketty (2013); Cagé (2018).

9 McCormick theorizes what he calls "Machiavellian democracy", which is a democracy that is made up of "class-specific institutions", i.e., assemblies wherein non-wealthy citizens can speak for themselves and take decisions among themselves (McCormick 2011, p. 13). I do not have space here to go into depth about McCormick's proposal, but it seems to me that his proposal meets the same problems that I will address later in this section regarding overall formal solutions.

or common knowledge (Christiano 2012; Cagé 2018). On the other hand, wealth provides its owners with a broader set of privileges that grant them further possibilities to affect the public decision-making process even without investing in it. This is the case, for instance, with a certain type of education and/or influential networks that people have thanks to their money—what is more generally called “social capital” (Robeyns 2017, pp. 9–10; Timmer 2019, p. 1337)—but also with the so-called “independent power” that rich people have in the economic sphere and that inevitably reflects on the political one (Christiano 2012). Wealth can certainly be both an instrument for gaining political influence (either directly or indirectly) and an instrument for acquiring all those non-wealth-related factors which also affect equal opportunities to influence politics.

Furthermore, formal measures fail to prevent this problem. First of all, tracking all the mechanisms through which wealth can be an instrument for gaining political influence does not really seem to be feasible. And even if it were feasible, one might ask whether this would be desirable given that “[t]he enforcement of procedural protection might involve potentially problematic invasions of privacy, insofar as it might require close monitoring of the spending patterns of the advantaged” (Schemmel 2011, p. 378). What seems even more problematic is that even if formal measures were both feasible and desirable for preventing money from translating into political influence, this would still not be enough to solve the problem. Such solutions would not tackle the above-mentioned independent ways in which wealth creates unequal opportunities for political influence.

Even if there is a formal separation between economics and politics, rich people can determine the success or failure of policies. Consider, for instance, the case of taxation. If the top marginal tax rate rose, affluent citizens could decide to move their capital to other countries where more favourable tax codes apply. To avoid this outcome, governments could refrain from raising the top marginal tax rate in the first place, in this sense “[g]overnments must make decisions with an eye to what powerful economic entities do in response to those decisions” (Christiano 2012, p. 8). Therefore, even if affluent citizens do not take part in the policy-making processes, they will inevitably influence them through their threats or promises (Knight & Johnson 1997; Christiano

2010). Thus, formal barriers cannot prevent the wealthy from having unfair chances to influence politics.

Substantive solutions should therefore be envisaged. As Christian Schemmel points out, these solutions would be both “less intrusive”, since they do not entail any monitoring of individuals’ spending, and “more effective”, because they solve the root of the problem. A suitable analogy is disarmament, which would be a better way of avoiding the issues related to weapons than “leaving the weapons in the possession of the advantaged, and merely prohibiting their use” (Schemmel 2011, pp. 378–379). However, it is important to note that what should be restrained is not individual wealth in itself, but rather that amount of wealth which leads to access to the above-mentioned mechanisms and privileges that are capable of circumventing formal constraints. Formulated differently, the problem is not that some have more wealth than others, nor that they can invest their wealth in politics, but rather that some have so much more wealth than others that they enjoy boundless, unfair opportunities to influence politics.¹⁰ Therefore, if we want the prior condition for freedom as non-domination, i.e., political legitimacy, to be ensured, what should be limited is excessive individual wealth.¹¹ In the next sections I will investigate how this could be done.

10 Similarly, Schemmel affirms that the problem does not arise “as long as plutocracy is avoided and the rich are not also the powerful, across the board, who use the political system merely to pursue their own interests” (2011, p. 379).

11 Suppose Apolitico is very rich, whereas Politico is not. Politico is so interested in politics that he invests all his resources in it, while Apolitico has absolutely no interest in politics; hence, although he has much more money than Politico, he does not invest any in this purpose. In the end, Politico will have greater political influence than Apolitico even if Apolitico is richer than him. Yet it seems to me that Apolitico is not dominated by Politico since in principle they enjoy equal opportunity to influence politics, Apolitico simply decides not to take it—recall that what is problematic is not that people have a different likelihood of success but rather that they have unfair opportunities to have an influence (Scanlon 2018). By contrast, and this might be counterintuitive, Apolitico does dominate Politico: even if Apolitico chooses not to take advantage of his greater opportunities to influence politics because of his wealth, he does have such opportunities. As the kindly master, Apolitico might decide never to intervene in politics, but his resources provide him with the uncontrolled capacity to do so—and, as we have seen, domination is a matter of capacity rather than of actual interference. Thus, it seems to me that for the sake of non-domination we should limit Apolitico’s fortunes rather than restraining Politico’s investments. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this example to me.

3. Limitarianism and the Problem of Flourishing

Ingrid Robeyns's limitarianism (2017; 2019; 2022) could provide neo-republicanism with such a limit. Limitarianism is a theory which argues that excessive individual wealth should be limited, and one of the reasons Robeyns offers for doing so is that it would protect democracy against the disproportionate political influence of the super-rich (Robeyns 2017, p. 5).¹² Moreover, the rationale looks similar to the one I have just analysed. Since the democratic ideal of political equality appears to be undermined by the presence of very wealthy citizens in a democracy—who can undeniably enjoy greater opportunities to influence politics because of their wealth—and formal constraints fail to overcome this issue, the wealth of these citizens should be limited. Put differently, to protect the democratic ideal of political equality, excessive individual fortunes should be restrained.

More precisely, Robeyns believes that what should be restrained is “surplus wealth”, i.e., the wealth that individuals possess above what she calls the “*riches line*”: “the level of wealth accumulation at which, at some point of increasing wealth, there is no additional contribution of additional wealth to one’s flourishing” (Robeyns 2022, p. 254, italics in the original). While under a certain level of wealth people might have valid reasons to keep their money for themselves so as to achieve their own life goals, above that level of wealth different conceptions of justice might admit that the benefit people could gain from their money is negligible, i.e., it is a “surplus” that they can live without. Robeyns certainly recognizes that the limitarian threshold does not necessarily coincide with such a so-called riches line—indeed, “[d]ifferent reasons for limitarianism could point to different limitarian thresholds” (Robeyns 2022, p. 254); in particular, she admits that the democratic argument might call for a relative limitarian threshold that is different from the one drawn in relation to the value of flourishing. However, she stresses that

12 The other reason is meeting “unmet urgent needs” (Robeyns 2017, p. 5). In short, the wealth of the super-rich should be limited to collect the resources needed to meet certain contemporary unmet urgent needs, such as poverty. Although Robeyns does not exclude the possibility of there being further reasons to endorse limitarianism, she adheres to the two arguments she previously puts forward, notably “the democratic argument” and “the argument from the unmet urgent needs” (Robeyns 2017, p. 5). This chapter focuses only on the former in relation to the reasoning discussed here.

there would nonetheless be “something special about surplus money for democratic purposes, which is that the opportunity cost in terms of flourishing for those who spend it on political influencing (thereby undermining political equality) is zero” (Robeyns 2022, p. 257). That is, people do not really experience any loss when they invest their surplus wealth in politics, so they are more likely to do it. It therefore seems to me that a limitarian threshold for political equality that corresponds to the riches line, i.e., limiting surplus wealth—the wealth people do not need for their full flourishing—is still desirable. Hence, I will focus first on this version of limitarianism.

The question that arises now is would such a version of limitarianism suit neo-republicanism? In other words, would such a limitarian threshold based on the riches line prevent those belonging to the economic elites from dominating the democratic process—which, as mentioned above, represents a dangerous, if not *the* most dangerous, threat to neo-republican freedom? According to Adelin-Costin Dumitru (2020), the answer is affirmative. Dumitru first introduces limitarianism within neo-republicanism because limitarianism “concentrates in a single theoretical umbrella the answers that can be given to [two neo-republican] intuitions”: the “intuitions against extreme wealth” on the one hand, and the “sufficientarian intuition” on the other (Dumitru 2020, pp. 386–387).

In his view, limitarianism should be advocated within neo-republicanism, firstly as a complement to the latter’s sufficientarian claim regarding material independence, namely the idea that to be free from domination, a person must own at least the relevant resources that are needed to be self-sustaining, otherwise she will depend on the arbitrary power of others to do so.¹³ Limitarianism would indicate from where the necessary resources to provide everyone with such a minimum could be collected. Furthermore, it would allow the collection of those resources without violating anyone’s rights.

This is because limitarianism would tax and redistribute that part of an individual’s wealth that does not contribute to helping that individual lead a flourishing life, *i.e.* a part that is irrelevant from the standpoint of justice (Dumitru 2020, p. 387, italics in the original).

13 As Dumitru himself recognizes, this idea is quite common among the proponents of freedom as non-domination; see for example, Pettit (1997; 2007; 2012); Raventós (2007); Lovett (2009).

In this respect, limitarianism would be the most adequate tool for promoting the goal of sufficiency.

Nonetheless, this is not the only way in which limitarianism would contribute to freedom as non-domination. According to Dumitru's account, limitarianism would also be beneficial to neo-republicanism because it would "ensure that the super-rich could not use their money in order to eschew the republican policies implemented in a country" (Dumitru 2020, p. 391). In other words, limitarianism would also be beneficial to neo-republicanism because it would avoid the wealthy having a disproportionate political influence, as discussed in the previous section. In addition to freedom as non-domination requiring a bottom threshold for material independence, therefore, freedom as non-domination would require an upper threshold, which would permit both the identification of which resources should be collected to meet the sufficiency goal and the preservation of democracy from the elites' unfair political power. Moreover, in relation to the version of limitarianism I sketched above, Dumitru argues that such an upper threshold should be drawn in relation to the idea of full flourishing so as not to violate anyone's rights. This is what he calls "republican limitarianism" (Dumitru 2020, p. 377).

Although I am sympathetic to Dumitru's view, I believe that limitarianism should be introduced within neo-republicanism first and foremost for this latter reason, since what we are looking for is a way to overcome the problem of economic elites in politics. Furthermore, it seems that neither formal institutional constraints nor sufficientarianism can protect citizens' equal opportunity in politics from the wealthy's unfair influence. An economic minimum for individuals would perhaps be necessary to grant everyone an independent say on public matters (Raventós 2007, p. 64). But this would not be sufficient to ensure them equal opportunities for political influence: "even if all citizens had access to *sufficient* means [...] richer citizens, who are able to spend more, would have significantly greater chances" (Scanlon 2018, p. 82, italics in the original). Hence, an upper economic limit should be advocated to prevent the wealthy from dominating the democratic process. This does not mean that fixing such a limit cannot help to achieve the sufficientarian goal, nor that this would not also decrease the horizontal domination (or *dominium*) of citizens by their very rich fellows. What I argue, however, is that

this limit should be fixed first to counter their vertical domination (or *imperium*). In this respect, though, Dumitru's specific proposal for republican limitarianism is problematic, because when it comes to protecting democracy from the disproportionate influence of the super-rich, the idea of full flourishing is a non-starter.

This is because, as Tammy Harel Ben-Shahar brilliantly highlights, the point at which political equality is undermined by excessive individual wealth does not necessarily coincide with the point at which individuals fully flourish (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019, p. 9). People under the riches line might still have enough wealth to enjoy boundless, disproportionate opportunities to influence politics. Moreover, this could be true even if these opportunities came with some costs in terms of flourishing. For some people it may be more important to influence the course of politics than to fully flourish, and some may even consider political power to be part of their flourishing and decide to invest their money in increasing their chances of getting it (Volacu & Dumitru 2019). In other words, although such individuals would not possess what Robeyns calls surplus money, i.e., they would not have more resources than those necessary for their complete flourishing, those individuals would still have more opportunities to influence the public decision-making process because of their wealth. A limitarian threshold that coincides with the riches line would thus prove to be ineffective for protecting the democratic ideal of political equality from the disproportionate influence of the wealthy.¹⁴

It should be noted that the fact that the riches line does not necessarily coincide with the point at which people enjoy greater opportunities for political influence because of their wealth does not mean that the riches line *must* be set at a higher level. It simply means that it *might* be—and, if it was, that this would be problematic for the purpose of protecting

14 A similar objection can be found in the work of Volacu & Dumitru (2019). The two authors argue that setting an upper limit to individual wealth would prove ineffective, as nothing below the set threshold would prevent individuals from funding the political process and thus gaining more influence through their financial means—which is what Dick Timmer calls the “efficacy objection” (Timmer 2019) and which I discuss elsewhere (Icardi 2022). Yet, under their construal, the problem seems to be that people below the riches line can still invest their wealth in politics. Instead, I argue that the problem is that people under the riches line could still possess enough resources to enjoy unequal opportunities to influence politics. As mentioned above, wealth investments in politics are not problematic *per se*, but they are problematic when they provide some people with disproportionate chances for political influence.

democracy from domination by the wealthy. In other words, what this argument suggests is that the level at which individuals fully flourish and that at which they enjoy unfair opportunities for political influence are distinct and that a priori we do not know which one happens to be higher than the other. Hence, if we want to leave people with enough resources to fully flourish, we *risk* leaving them with enough resources to dominate the democratic process too, thus undermining freedom as non-domination. It therefore seems that to protect neo-republican liberty from the wealthy's vertical domination, we should give up the idea of defining the limit in terms of full flourishing and, instead, set the threshold where that kind of domination materializes—which is similar to what Harel Ben-Shahar envisages for political equality in general (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019).¹⁵

However, one might argue that the surplus condition stands as a necessary condition to justify the limitarian threshold. Excessive individual wealth can be limited above the riches line precisely because it no longer contributes to individuals' flourishing. A trade-off therefore seems to be needed: to realize freedom as non-domination we should limit the wealthy's resources to prevent them from enjoying disproportionate political influence, but since we cannot deprive people of the resources they need to fully flourish, the limitarian threshold should coincide with the riches line, thus limiting only surplus wealth.

This trade-off looks problematic for at least two reasons, though. Firstly, because the limitarian threshold would not be the same for the two separate outcomes of fully flourishing and not having an unfair political influence, the riches line, which is nothing but the limitarian threshold when defined in relation to the value of full flourishing, would not guarantee a solution to the problem of economic elites in politics. Besides, as argued above, formal measures appear unable to come to the rescue. Notwithstanding this problem, one might say that freedom as non-domination, which, let us remember, is based on such a political legitimacy requirement, should not be considered as the only value at stake. This seems to be Dumitru's thesis: "freedom as non-domination

15 Note that I am not arguing that the idea of full flourishing should be given up in general; this idea might still be valuable in other respects. For example, I do not address the question of whether defining the limit in terms of full flourishing would suit the argument of unmet urgent needs (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019; Icardi 2022).

does not exhaust the realm of justice” (Dumitru 2020, p. 395). Namely, there are other values that should be taken into account, such as individual flourishing.

The notion of flourishing thus provides us with this second threshold. Above the point of non-domination, inequalities do not matter, up to a cut-off point at which any money someone might still own will not help her flourish anymore (Dumitru 2020, p. 396).

Secondly, however, it seems to me that, *contra* Dumitru, from a neo-republican perspective it would not make sense to trade freedom as non-domination for the sake of flourishing. This is not only because, for neo-republicans, freedom as non-domination overall is the ultimate value, but also because being free from domination represents the prior condition that has to be secured for people to flourish. As a matter of fact, if people are to shape and pursue their own lifegoals and beliefs, they should not, first and foremost, be exposed to anyone else’s arbitrary power. Of course, there are other conditions that allow people to achieve self-realization, e.g., their abilities, health, material means and so on. But as a matter of justice, freedom as non-domination should be safeguarded first, because if you are not free, even if you are able and healthy and/or you have the means to do something, you can only do it *cum permissu*—by experiencing the same uncertainty as an enslaved person who has a “kindly” enslaver. In this respect, freedom as non-domination should be understood as a primary good in Rawlsian terms, namely something that everyone would like to have to achieve their other aims (Pettit 1997, p. 91). Hence, for a neo-republican, it would be pointless to withdraw less resources than the amount that is needed to ensure freedom as non-domination in order to protect people’s possibility of fully flourishing, because in the neo-republican view, their possibility of flourishing relies on their freedom as non-domination in the first place.

At this stage, from the neo-republican perspective, there would be only one reason left for establishing a limitarian threshold in relation to the idea of fully flourishing. Dumitru does not explore this option since he generally regards full flourishing and non-domination as two distinct goals. But a neo-republican could, instead, consider them as strictly linked to one another. If full flourishing was constitutive of freedom as non-domination, we would have a reason not to withdraw the resources people might need to fully flourish even though leaving people with those resources might undermine freedom as non-domination in other

respects, for instance by providing some people with disproportionate opportunities to influence politics. On this account, being free from domination would not only entail the absence of anyone else's arbitrary power, but also the presence of a certain set of opportunities to achieve self-realization (Qizilbash 2016, p. 26).

If we leave aside questions concerning why, for instance, someone's full flourishing should in this case be given priority over improving everyone's flourishing *tout court* (Harel ben-Shahar 2019, p. 10),¹⁶ we can focus on the fact that this reading is incompatible with Pettit's understanding of freedom as non-domination. Although according to Pettit reaching "personal self-mastery" (Pettit 1997, pp. 81–82) without being free from domination appears to be impossible, he believes that one can be free from domination with or without reaching one's "personal self-mastery", because freedom as non-domination is an issue of status rather than of realizing opportunities. What really matters is that people have equal power independently of the number of choices that are open to them.¹⁷ This does not mean that no options should be secured as a matter of freedom as non-domination. As mentioned above, people should be allowed at least a minimum level of resources so that everyone is granted the relevant material independence. Nonetheless, how many options a person has above such a minimum does not seem to be a matter of domination any longer. As Kyle Swan puts it lucidly,

[p]roviding more than would secure such independence would certainly promote the beneficiaries' capabilities, their real or effective freedom to achieve well-being, since more valued beings and doings would be open to them. But none of this does anything to open up choices where they had previously been subject to domination (Swan 2012, p. 445).

In conclusion, freedom as non-domination does not entail individual flourishing, although it stands as the necessary—albeit not

16 If we admit that flourishing is constitutive of freedom as non-domination, we might wonder, with Harel Ben-Shahar, "why we should prioritize obtaining full flourishing for one (the rich), instead of using the resources for improving flourishing for those who are significantly less flourishing" (2019, p. 10). That is, if flourishing is so important, why shouldn't we argue that the super-rich's wealth should indeed be redistributed to grant everyone a certain level of flourishing?

17 Here lies the difference between what Pettit calls "structural egalitarianism" and what he calls "material egalitarianism". The former means enjoying the same power and is needed for freedom as non-domination, while the latter means enjoying similar bundles of options and is not needed for freedom as non-domination (Pettit 1997, p. 113).

sufficient—condition for it since it provides people with the possibility to freely shape and pursue their own life goals. It follows that rather than denying someone’s possibility to fully flourish, establishing the limitarian threshold for the sake of freedom as non-domination, i.e., putting it where excessive individual wealth jeopardizes the requirement of political legitimacy, would ground it. Hence, from the neo-republican perspective, the trade-off would be pointless. The next section investigates what this limitarian threshold that is independent of the value of flourishing should look like.

4. A Limitarian Threshold for Freedom as Non-Domination

To sum up, for freedom as non-domination to be secured, people should enjoy equal opportunities to influence the public decision-making process. The concentration of wealth in the hands of few people (i.e., the existence of socioeconomic elites in a democracy) jeopardizes such a prior condition for neo-republican liberty. Moreover, since formal constraints fail to sufficiently protect this condition, what should be limited is excessive individual wealth itself. However, when it comes to ensuring freedom as non-domination within democracy, such a limit should not be established with reference to the idea of full flourishing, as is the case with Robeyns’s riches line, which has been retrieved by Dumitru. This is because freedom as non-domination and flourishing are not only two distinct values but they can also conflict with one another. Besides, for neo-republicans it would not make sense to trade their fundamental value—freedom as non-domination—for the sake of another value such as flourishing. Thus, the limitarian threshold should be drawn so as to protect only freedom as non-domination.

Nevertheless, if both the bottom threshold and the upper threshold were established in relation to the idea of freedom as non-domination, according to Dumitru, “the sufficiency and limitarian threshold would be identical” (Dumitru 2020, p. 395). This is because, in his view, freedom as non-domination can instruct us only about the bottom threshold. Namely, when it comes to distributive justice, the sole requirement of freedom as non-domination would be material independence: once material independence has been granted to everyone, material inequalities would no longer be a matter of domination. Hence,

according to Dumitru, from the neo-republican perspective it would be impossible to identify any further threshold without referring to other values, such as the value of full flourishing. In this respect, if overall resources were so scarce as to be hardly sufficient to grant everyone material independence, for the sake of freedom as non-domination and freedom as non-domination only, it seems plausible to assume that all of the resources that people do not need for their self-sustainment could and should be redistributed with the aim of granting everyone material independence. It follows that in this situation, the upper threshold would collapse into the bottom one, or the upper threshold would not exist. This contradicts my insight that we can establish a limitarian threshold for the sake of freedom as non-domination without referring to the idea of full flourishing.

However, I believe that this problem arises only when the limitarian threshold is introduced within neo-republicanism firstly as a complement to sufficientarianism, as Dumitru mainly holds. By contrast, if the limitarian threshold is advocated as a solution to the elites' boundless political power, as I suggest, this problem would not arise given that there are reasons to think that what allows the economic elites to enjoy boundless political power is that those belonging to such elites own *much more* wealth than others. Let's think about the above-mentioned case of taxation increases causing capital to be sent to another country. If your capital is only slightly larger than that of your fellow citizens, your threat to move it if there is a tax rise will suddenly lose its weight, i.e., you will not have any problematic independent power concerning the success or failure of that policy (Knight & Johnson 1997; Christiano 2010). Formal separations between politics and economics would therefore prove to be effective in similar cases. As a matter of fact, to enjoy disproportionate opportunities to exert a political influence because of your wealth despite formal constraints that aim to prevent you from doing so, you should own *much more* wealth than your fellow citizens. On the one hand, no-one would enjoy greater power than their fellow citizens if everyone possessed similar resources—no matter the extent of those resources.¹⁸ On the other hand, no-one would enjoy this power boundlessly if they had slightly more resources than others

18 This is the reason why many advocates of limitarianism envisage a relative threshold; see Harel Ben-Shahar (2019); Ali & Caranti (2021); Caranti & Ali (2021); Icardi (2022).

(Icardi 2022). Again, it is not economic inequalities in themselves that undermine democracy, but *stark* economic inequalities (Pansardi 2016).¹⁹ Thus, the aim of protecting democracy from the elites' domination would provide the grounds for a limitarian threshold which is different from the sufficiency line despite not relying on the idea of full flourishing. In this respect, it seems to me that contrary to what Dumitru assumes, the upper threshold would differ from the bottom threshold even if both are grounded on the idea of freedom as non-domination.

When it comes to preventing the wealthy from dominating the democratic process, the limitarian threshold should be both relative to what citizens own on average, and relatively high compared with what citizens own on average since it should be put at the point at which individual wealth represents a threat to democracy and formal measures can only have a minimal effect on it. If excessive individual wealth is not limited, some people will always be able to enjoy disproportionate chances to influence politics because of this wealth, thus dominating the public decision-making process. This does not mean that the limitarian threshold would be sufficient to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity for political influence. Laws formally granting citizens political equality are necessary too, and power asymmetries other than those resulting from economic inequalities should be addressed to secure neo-republican liberty. Furthermore, limiting the power of lobbyists and corporations should probably be envisaged as well.²⁰ Nevertheless, given the difficulty of insulating political power from economic power, limiting excessive individual wealth appears to be a necessary means to granting political legitimacy,²¹ and limitarianism is a good way of doing so.

19 For empirical works on this matter see, for instance, Dahl (1998); Gilens (2005, p. 786).

20 For reasons concerning space, I will not elaborate on this issue. But, as I suggest elsewhere (Icardi 2022), different solutions might be envisaged to decrease these entities' power: where some might be inspired to exercise limitarianism, for example by limiting the wealth of private firms, others might depart from it. Nonetheless, limiting excessive individual wealth could have some beneficial effects, for instance it would reduce the purchasing power of individual shareholders, thus decreasing the concentration of power in their hands.

21 Regarding the idea that limiting economic inequality plays an instrumental role in political equality, see Ronzoni (2022). According to her, "distributive equality is, at closer scrutiny, used as a proxy for *political* equality [...]: we are concerned with

This leads to a further impasse. If the limitarian threshold should preserve the democratic process, it follows that where such a threshold should be put cannot be decided by this process itself. Because the democratic process would precede the introduction of the economic limit, it would be biased towards the interests of the wealthy, who would still enjoy a greater influence on the democratic process because of their wealth (Caranti & Ali 2021, p. 96). In other words, given that formal constraints can do little to prevent the super-rich from having unfair opportunities to influence the public decision-making process, the choice of where to put the limitarian threshold, if made democratically, would inevitably favour the super-rich's preferences. Excessive individual wealth should therefore be limited *ex ante*, and such a limit should represent a precondition of democracy.

However, such a limit that is implemented *ex ante* risks being a source of domination in another sense, namely by being established without citizens having any control over it and therefore being arbitrary in the neo-republican sense. It seems to me that the impasse just described is only apparent, though. If excessive individual wealth *inevitably* undermines citizens' equal opportunities to influence the public decision-making process, far from threatening political legitimacy, restraining it would grant it. Accordingly, I agree with Pamela Pansardi when she says that a more equal distribution of resources "is not to be understood as a goal that democracy should promote, but rather as a procedural requirement for the realization of the ideal of democracy as non-domination" (Pansardi 2016, p. 103).²² In the same way in which everyone should be granted "equal access to the system of popular influence" (Pettit 2012, p. 169) as a precondition of citizens enjoying control over the state, everyone should be prevented from having too much.²³ This is because if someone had too much, formal constraints

material inequality because it so easily translates into power inequality" (Ronconi 2022, p. 748, italics in the original).

- 22 I read the term "procedural" in the quotation not in the sense of meaning non-substantive but in the sense of being a (substantive) requirement for the very democratic procedure.
- 23 I set aside the question of how this *ex ante* limit should be set. My insight is that empirical studies should instruct us about the level at which individual wealth allows its owners to gain boundless uneven opportunities; that is where the limit should be put. Besides, this top-down process should be followed by a bottom-up one. In line with Pettit's idea of "individual contestability" (Pettit 1997; 2012), each citizen should have the possibility to contest this choice. More precisely,

could not prevent them from gaining extra chances to influence politics because of their wealth; hence, they would enjoy greater control over the public decision-making process—that is, they would dominate it; thus, freedom as non-domination would be undermined.

As I see it, then, if one advocates limitarianism for neo-republicanism, one has to consider the former as an ideal theory: excess individual wealth should not be limited only in the world as it is, but also in the world as it should be. This differs from Robeyns’s understanding of limitarianism as a non-ideal theory (Robeyns 2017) that would apply to “the present and nearby possible worlds” (Robeyns 2022, p. 251). According to her, limitarianism would represent a proposal for worlds characterised by the present or similar injustices, while in my view it would be part and parcel of the ideal world to which we should aim as a matter of justice. For a neo-republican, such an ideal world is distinguished by the fact that everyone enjoys freedom as non-domination, and, as I have been arguing, this outcome appears to be impossible without limiting excess individual wealth—even in the most ideal of democracies, if some people had too much, they would dominate the public decision-making process thanks to their wealth. Therefore, if the democratic process is to be preserved from the super-rich’s domination, their wealth has to be limited *ex ante*. Under this construal, perhaps the limitarian threshold would not qualify as a solution to the present problem of economic elites—not least because it would be far too late to intervene *ex ante*—but it could certainly become a key feature of ideal democracy in a neo-republican normative outlook.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, freedom as non-domination requires excessive individual wealth to be limited. Given that the wealthy enjoy a disproportionate opportunity for political influence because of their wealth and formal

citizens should be able to contest the extent of the limitarian threshold, as well as its implementation and so on—with the economic limit in place, their public decision-making would no longer be unavoidably biased towards the interests of the wealthy. By contrast, citizens should not be able to contest the threshold itself, namely they should not be able to remove it—in the same way in which citizens can amend the democratic system without being able to remove the condition of equal opportunity of influence. Nevertheless, further work seems to be needed to better grasp this top-down, bottom-up process.

institutional constraints cannot adequately address that problem, limiting excessive individual wealth stands as a necessary condition for the democratic requirement grounding neo-republican liberty, and this condition can be achieved through a limitarian threshold. Thus, limitarianism should be advocated within neo-republicanism.

However, the threshold should be put at that point at which individual wealth jeopardizes citizens' equal opportunity for political influence, instead of corresponding to Robeyns's riches line and limiting the wealth that individuals do not need to fully flourish, as Dumitru upholds. Moreover, unlike for Dumitru, this threshold would not coincide with the level at which everyone is materially independent since people must possess many more resources than their fellows to enjoy greater chances of influencing politics because of them. Since such an economic limit is a precondition of political legitimacy, it would not be a source of domination itself. Moreover, unless we envisage a democratic system on a global scale, this precondition would hold only within state borders.

Where exactly the limit should be put remains an open question. This seems to be a question for empirical studies, which should inform us about how much individual wealth actually represents a danger to democracy. Another open question concerns what exactly should be limited. Which kind of economic resources threaten the proper functioning of the democratic process? Should we worry about individuals' incomes, their wealth, or what they inherit? These too seem to be questions which require further empirical work to be done—the guiding criterion to answer these questions being to what extent these kinds of economic resources have an adverse effect on the vertical dimension of freedom as non-domination.

Nevertheless, this chapter focuses on the normative reasons for introducing limitarianism within neo-republicanism. This should be done to prevent the economic elites from dominating politics and therefore the threshold should be set where this risk materializes. Interestingly, freedom as non-domination then offers a further argument for limitarianism that is independent from the controversial value of full flourishing but is still compatible with the overall presumption that up to a certain level people would be permitted to keep their resources for themselves.

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II. The Self-Respect Argument for Limitarianism

Christian Neuhäuser

Limitarianism is the view that justice requires the limitation of wealth, at least under certain conditions. In its original form the view was developed by Ingrid Robeyns and normatively justified by the use of two arguments, the democratic argument and the argument from unmet urgent needs (Robeyns 2017; 2022). The democratic argument states that a certain concentration of wealth undermines the fair value of political equality. Very wealthy and especially extremely rich people have disproportionate and sometimes dominating political power. Justice requires the limitation of wealth to a point where it does not undermine political equality. The unmet urgent needs argument states that wealth above a certain threshold does not contribute anything, or at least anything that is significant for the flourishing of wealthy people.¹ For this reason, money above this threshold can be put to much better use meeting the urgent needs of others, which can reasonably be conceptualized as a requirement of justice. Justice therefore requires the redistribution of wealth above this threshold. Due to efficiency considerations, it might be better not to tax all money above the threshold, but only a large portion. Economists often judge seventy per cent to be an efficient upper/highest marginal tax rate (Hamlin 2018).

In this chapter I want to contribute to the justification of limitarianism by providing a novel argument for limitarianism which is distinct from

1 The account of flourishing can either be ontologically objective in the sense defended by Martha Nussbaum (2006) or made objective through public procedures, as advocated by Amartya Sen (2009).

the two arguments developed by Robeyns.² This argument is based on self-respect as a primary basic good (Rawls 2001; Eyal 2005; Stark 2012). According to this argument, limitarianism is needed to protect the social basis of self-respect of all members of society so that they can develop a sense of self-worth and pursue their personal projects. Since this kind of self-respect is a more important basic good than wealth above a certain threshold, limitarianism can be justified either as a principle of justice or as a direct policy implication of the principles of justice, if it turns out to be required to secure the social basis of self-respect. This self-respect argument is compatible with the democratic and unmet urgent needs arguments. At the same time, it stands on its own. Even if the democratic argument and the unmet urgent needs argument fail, the self-respect argument can provide a robust basis for the justification of limitarianism (Volacu/Dumitru 2019; Timmer 2019; Huseby 2022).

In this chapter, the self-respect argument for a limitarian principle of justice will be developed in five sections. In the first section I will discuss the idea of self-respect as developed by Rawls. I will argue that even according to the best available interpretation of the Rawlsian conception of self-respect as provided by Cynthia Stark (2012), the conception is still incomplete. The Rawlsian conception of self-respect is too psychological and ignores the normative structure of the dependence of self-respect on social respect in a problematic way. Because of this, Rawls overlooks the function that economic equality, or rather limited economic inequality, has as a social basis for self-respect. This critique of the classical Rawlsian conception of self-respect lays the foundation for the self-respect-based argument for limitarianism. In the second section I will give a brief informal overview of this argument, and in the remaining three sections I will discuss the most important elements of the argument. In the third section I will defend the claim that self-respect depends in a normative way on the status as a citizen of equal standing. In the fourth section I will argue that the difference principle is ill-suited to securing equal standing as a social basis of self-respect. This leads to the claim in the fifth section that for this reason the difference principle should be complemented by a limitarian principle. This can

2 A number of additional arguments have been developed by other authors since then (e.g., Zwarthoed 2018; Dumitru 2020; Gough 2020; Timmer 2021; Elena Icardi as well as Tim Meijers in this volume). The argument presented here is different from those arguments.

be understood either as a principle of justice that is integrated into the second Rawlsian principle or as a policy that is directly justified by the second principle of justice. This depends on, as I will argue later, how the difference principle is interpreted. The chapter ends with a brief summary of the argument and the prospect of an ecumenical view regarding the limitarian principle.

1. Self-Respect as a Primary Good and Its Dependence on Equal Respect

John Rawls famously states that self-respect is one of the basic goods and may be the most important one. He gives self-respect a central, albeit sometimes overlooked, place in his theory of justice. And Rawls is quite clear about the importance of self-respect. He writes about it as a basic good (2001, p. 59):

The social bases of self-respect, understood as those aspects of social institutions normally essential of citizens are to have a lively sense of their worth as persons and to be able to advance their ends with self-confidence.

Rawls thinks that self-respect is necessary for self-esteem, which in turn is necessary to be able to pursue personal projects, which in turn is necessary for giving meaning to life. In short, in the Rawlsian framework self-respect is a necessary condition of a meaningful life. This is apparently also the reason why it is so important for Rawls to state in different places that his principles of justice provide a sufficient social basis for self-respect. It is true, of course, that a liberal theory of justice can contribute to the meaning of life only indirectly through providing means for different ends, since according to liberal beliefs individuals should be autonomous in giving meaning to their lives. However, a liberal theory of justice still needs to provide the social basis that enables people to do so. If it does not, it fails people in terms of what is most important to them.

The question then is how exactly the principles of justice secure the social basis of self-respect. My understanding is that the best interpretation of the Rawlsian account of self-respect at the time of writing has been provided by Cynthia Stark (2012). She argues that it is a mistake to assume that self-respect is a basic good only because

it is of instrumental value. Instead, Rawls is best read as claiming that self-respect also has intrinsic value and that the principles of justice are necessary to secure this intrinsic value. Stark makes her point by arguing that self-respect depends on both personal and political circumstances. On the basis of this assumption, she claims that a citizen needs to be able to see their social contributions as valuable in order to have secure self-respect. This valuable contribution can be understood in three ways. According to the first understanding, the contribution has to be seen as especially meritorious for self-respect. The more valuable the contribution is, the more reason someone has to respect themselves. According to the second interpretation, the contribution has to be intrinsically good for the contributor themselves. Contributing to society in a specific way needs to make the life of the contributor better in a direct way. According to the third interpretation, the contribution simply has to matter socially. It has to be something that benefits society, albeit not in an especially meritocratic way.

Stark argues that the first interpretation is incompatible with the egalitarian perspective of Rawlsian theories, because it would create a hierarchy of respect and self-respect based on the assumed value of social contributions. The real issue is between the second and third interpretations. Stark argues that only the third interpretation is supported by Rawls' theory, because it is only here that the linkage between political circumstances and self-respect which is needed for a political theory of self-respect is established. The problem with the second interpretation is that the political duty of mutual respect, the difference principle, and the priority of liberty would not be needed for self-respect if the value of self-respect was merely seen as something that is intrinsically good for a person. It is possible to achieve a basic structure in which people are able to freely pursue their personal life projects without these political principles. If, however, self-respect depends on the fact that one's social contribution matters socially, those principles become crucial. It is only when those principles are in place that citizens can have a secure sense that their contributions are seen as valuable by society and that they matter in this way. This is true because those principles are meant to ensure, as I will argue later, that people can act as citizens that make socially important contributions and are seen as such.

With her interpretation, Stark manages to refute a serious counterargument against the Rawlsian position that has been levelled

in the literature several times (Thomas 1978; Eyal 2005; Doppelt 2009). Supporters of this counterargument understand self-respect as being in line with the second interpretation and therefore as only having instrumental value for pursuing personal life projects. This disconnects self-respect from the principles of justice in a problematic way, because it is conceivable to make self-respect psychologically immune against what in Rawlsian terms has to be seen as prevailing injustices. Based on this assumption, the critics argue that the argument for the specific Rawlsian principles of justice based on the basic good of self-respect is deficient, because the instrumental good of self-respect can be secured in other ways. If this were true, the basic good of self-respect would not properly be secured by the Rawlsian principles of justice and they would have to be revised accordingly.

However, if Stark is correct that for Rawls self-respect has intrinsic value and that it depends on socially valuable contributions, then this counterargument is not sound. Since self-respect is of intrinsic value in the sense that it is not only linked to the individual conception of the good life of a citizen but is also directly attached to socially valuable contributions, the principles of justice are necessary to secure this attachment. I think that Stark's interpretation of Rawls is superior to the others provided in the literature because it manages to show that his theory is not inconsistent in an obviously damaging way. At the same time, Stark's interpretation brings out two other problems with Rawls's understanding of self-respect that are important when considering limitarianism. The first problem is that even according to Stark's reading, Rawls' theory still is too psychological. The second, and for this chapter the crucial, problem is that according to her interpretation it appears to be somewhat arbitrary to see political equality as necessary but economic inequality as unproblematic for self-respect.

Rawls might not have intended to create the first problem, which is that the understanding of self-respect is overly psychological. As Stark points out, he sees self-respect as being of intrinsic value as well as dependent on political circumstances rather than solely on personal ones. Someone who is not respected properly by the institutions of the basic structure of society has reason to see their self-respect as being violated regardless of whether or not this harms their psychological ability to pursue their personal projects. However, even according to Stark's interpretation, the intrinsic value of self-respect is understood as being foundational for a secure belief in the objective worth of the

personal projects one pursues. This belief is secured, in Stark's reading, by a society which communicates that the contribution of at least some of those projects matter socially. The principles of justice and institutions derived from them are needed to secure this belief in the social value of one's contributions.

I think that this understanding of the relation between self-respect, the principles of justice, and socially valuable contributions has it backwards. It is not because people's self-respect depends psychologically on socially valuable contributions that they deserve respect in the form of the principles of justice. Instead, people first deserve respect as equal members of society who matter. Because of this, part of the task of the principles of justice is to offer them the opportunity to engage in contributions that are socially valuable.³ If a person is not respected by society and its institutions, their complaint must not be that psychologically they cannot experience the social worth of their projects anymore. They might be very aware of the fact that society treats them wrongly but may still be secure in the belief that they matter and what they have to offer matters too. Their complaint is that society does not respect them or their 'self', so to speak, in the way it should. The kind of harm done to their self-respect, which has a negative effect on them, is normative and not primarily psychological.⁴ So the ameliorated Rawlsian understanding of self-respect advocated here is that a person respects themselves if they see themselves as a member of society with equal standing to other members who are entitled to be respected as such.

The second problem emerges once the normative understanding of self-respect is established, and it is closely related to the question of why

3 Note that 'socially valuable' is very different from 'economically valuable'. If social structures are set up properly, persons with severe mental disabilities can make socially valuable contributions, for instance by having close relations with other people and broadening their view of life and humanity. The understanding of self-respect advocated here, therefore, can be used to defend the equal social status of persons with severe disabilities. However, this does not change the fact that Rawlsian contractualism is faced with the problem of being under-inclusive in its set up of the original position (Nussbaum 2007).

4 My reading of this normative conception of self-respect is that it goes back to the work of Avishai Margalit (1994). Colin Bird (2008) briefly mentions this in his criticism, but continues to level his critique against a psychological conception of self-respect. One problem, certainly, is that Margalit is rather sketchy in his remarks on this topic, and to the time of writing no author has sufficiently analysed the distinction between a psychological and a normative conception.

a principle of limitarianism might be needed in a Rawlsian theory of justice. According to Rawls, one reason for choosing equal basic rights, including the fair value of equal political rights, is the fact that they are needed for citizens to see themselves respected as contributing members of society (1971, p. 441). It is only when they are seen as politically equal citizens that they will have sufficient reasons to believe that they are respected by the institutions of the basic structure. If this position is convincing, and for the purpose of this chapter I assume that it is, a further consideration presents itself immediately. It could be argued that economic equality is also necessary for citizens to see themselves as being respected as equal members of society since economic institutions are part of the basic structure. Therefore, these institutions should be designed to ensure strong economic equality.

However, this is not the position Rawls takes. He favours the difference principle instead, which arguably allows for an economic incentive structure which at least in principle allows considerable, though not boundless, economic inequality (Reiff 2012). It is not so clear why Rawls believes that economic equality is unnecessary for ensuring respect as a social basis of self-respect. Maybe it is because he believes that political equality and fair equality of opportunity will ensure that the level of economic inequality is not too high, but this is far from a given, as I will discuss later on. This uncertainty opens up a discussion about whether the difference principle alone is well-suited for protecting the social basis of self-respect. If the difference principle is compatible with a relatively high level of economic inequality and if this threatens self-respect, then it needs to be replaced with or maybe supplemented by a limitarian principle. The purpose of such a limitarian principle would be to limit economic inequality to a level required to ensure that the social basis of self-respect is not threatened.

One promising way to avoid this need to supplement the difference principle with a limitarian principle would be to argue that the difference principle is not only concerned with the primary goods of income and wealth but also directly with self-respect. If understood in this way, any difference in income and wealth allowed by the difference principle is already limited to such a degree which means that the social basis of self-respect is not threatened. In this case, the limitarian principle would already be built into the difference principle. In the fifth section I will argue that it does not matter much what the right interpretation of the

difference principle is. It is enough to establish that the Rawlsian position based on an ameliorated normative understanding of self-respect has to embrace a limitarian principle of justice and a policy that directly limits the highest level of possible incomes and wealth accumulation. The argument presented in the next sections of this chapter is meant to achieve that result.

2. Respect, Economic Inequality, and the Difference Principle

As mentioned in the previous section, according to Rawls, political inequality is incompatible with equal respect but economic inequality appears to be compatible with it. Since not only political but economic institutions are part of the basic structure of society, this different assessment of the political and the economic realm is in need of an explanation. There needs to be a considerable difference between the political and the economic status of citizens that is strong enough to explain the need for equality in the political realm and a lack thereof in the economic realm. Moreover, and most importantly, for the Rawlsian position to hold, it must also be the case that there are no other reasons independent of the one present in the political case that ground economic equality as a requirement for equal respect.

There is indeed a reason why political equality is required that is not present in the economic case, and it has to do with the binding decision-making and the monopoly of force of the state. However, it does not follow from this difference that economic equality or at least a limitation of inequality is not required. This is because there is an independent reason for this requirement, which is based on the primary good of self-respect. There still remains a difference between the political and the economic realm, because the independent reason leads to a weaker requirement, not for strict equality but for limited inequality. I will discuss these claims in three steps in this section, because they provide the background for the argument for a limitarian principle that will be developed in the following sections.

The first step of the argument is to acknowledge that there is one clear reason for requiring strict equality in the political case that is not present in the economic case. This reason is simply that the state is

an agent of utmost power, because the basic rules of society are made binding in a political process and the state is granted the monopoly of force to enforce compliance with those rules (McMahon 1994). It is only when citizens have an equal say over those rules that they have reason to see themselves as equal members of society. Having less say than others obviously directly constitutes having a lower rank, because one is politically dominated by those others and subjected to their political will. This is the reason, I surmise, why Rawls demands that a fair value is given to the right to equal participation and that it is not just a formal right (Krishnamurthy 2013; Edmundson 2020).

The same structure of domination is not present in the economic case, because arguably there are no binding decisions of a similar magnitude that are backed up by a monopoly of force. Instead, at least in relatively ideal circumstances, economic agents have the option to exit specific institutional arrangements without considerable costs such as not working for a certain company or not buying certain products anymore. But even under those relatively ideal circumstances, most citizens probably cannot afford to stop working altogether and everyone has to buy at least some goods. But improved exit options and the continual possibility of changing the legal rules that govern economic structures and institutions through political decision-making processes reduce domination at the workplace to such an extent that it becomes very unlike political domination on the state level. This is also the reason for the failure of direct parallel-case arguments that demand democratization of companies, simply because states have to be democratic in order to be legitimate (Jacob & Neuhäuser 2018).

The second step of the argument is to consider the possibility that there is another reason for linking economic inequality and status as a member of society with equal standing. First, it should be clear that it does not directly follow from the disanalogy between political and economic equality that there are no reasons for requiring equality in the economic realm. It may simply be that there are different arguments for such a requirement that directly apply to the economic realm. However, to my knowledge no such argument has been provided by the time of writing. There are many different general arguments for a presumption of equality that could be applied to the economic realm (Timmer 2021). But the problem with those arguments is that they only make a *prima*

facie case, since reasons for departing from strict equality can be given.⁵ The difference principle, for instance, gives such a reason by favouring maximizing welfare over equality (Freeman 2013). Such reasons can be disputed, of course, but even then, strict equality would not be a direct requirement of justice. It would just be the result of the fact that all reasons for departing from equality are defeated, which is rather unlikely in any case.

The argument that probably comes closest to a more direct defence of strict equality in the economic case is forcefully brought forward by Elizabeth Anderson and some other republican-minded authors (Anderson 2017; González-Ricoy 2014; Breen 2015). Anderson claims that in many workplaces workers are dominated in a way that undermines relational equality. Since relational equality is demanded by justice, those kinds of domination are unjust. I think this demand is compatible with a Rawlsian framework broadly conceived. As will be further discussed in the next section, Rawlsian self-respect depends on relational equality in the sense that everyone has a claim to be seen and treated as an equal member of society. It is also possible to agree from this point of view that domination at the workplace undermines this form of equal standing. However, this does not establish a requirement of strict equality in the whole economic realm that includes an equal distribution of wealth and income. Instead, it establishes that all forms of inequality that lead to domination or undermine a person's standing as an equal member of society in other ways are unjust.

In the third step, the basic idea of the argument against excessive inequality deriving from self-respect can be given as a reason for demanding equal standing in the economic realm. According to this argument, citizens have a right to be seen and treated as equal members of society since this is what the normative understanding of self-respect as a primary good of utmost importance requires. Moreover, forms of economic inequality that undermine a person's standing as an equal member of society are objectionable from this point of view. Also, forms of economic inequality that do not undermine equal standing are not objectionable on the ground of the normative self-respect argument. As I see it, this leads to a limitarian principle, because such a principle can

5 Which is famously one of the tasks that Gerald Cohen (2008) continued to labour on.

be designed to reduce economic inequality to such a degree that it is compatible with equal standing as just described.

This argument for restricting economic inequality has to answer a number of questions. What exactly is equal standing and why is it so important for self-respect? What forms of economic inequality undermine equal standing and what forms do not? In what way might a limitarian principle be needed to secure equal standing? Dealing with these questions is crucial for determining whether a limitarian principle should be integrated into the Rawlsian framework of the principles of justice to disallow forms of economic inequality that damage equal standing. Is a limitarian principle needed for those principles to meet their task of securing the social basis of self-respect? I want to approach this set of questions in the following sections step by step. This discussion will show that the basic liberties and the fair equality of opportunity principle are crucial for securing self-respect but that the difference principle as the sole distributive principle is ill-suited to this task because it fails to establish equal standing. This result opens up conceptual space for supplementing the difference principle with a limitarian principle.

3. Equal Standing and Self-Respect

The concept of the equal standing of citizens is crucially important for answering the question concerning whether or not economic inequality of a certain magnitude is a threat to self-respect. This depends on two assumptions, namely that economic inequality threatens this kind of equal standing and that equal standing as a citizen is a social basis of self-respect. So, the crucial question is what speaks for those two assumptions? In this section I will argue that equal standing is necessary for self-respect, albeit in a normative sense rather than a psychological one. The assumption that economic inequality undermines equal standing will be addressed in the next section, although fully defending these assumptions is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, I want to highlight that they are not without plausibility, which is sufficient to give the limitarian principle some grounding as a principle of justice in a Rawlsian framework broadly conceived.

In order to establish the dependency of self-respect on equal standing as citizens, two things have to be shown. First, the normative

dependency of self-respect on respect has to be established (Dillon 2022). Second, it has to be explained why this concerns respect as an equal member of society and not simply as a citizen with equal legal rights. The idea that self-respect depends on the respect of others is criticized by pointing to the fact that a person can retain their self-respect even if they are disrespected (Bird 2008). The critique takes it for granted that the dependency is understood as being causal and that through psychological mechanisms self-respect is causally undermined by various forms of disrespect. If, however, cases can be provided in which someone retains their self-respect in such a situation, the claim of dependency is undermined. I think this anti-dependency argument is wrong, because it presupposes an overly heroic conception of the self. However, I will not defend the hypothesis of psychological dependency, which requires a chapter of its own, here.

Instead, I want to argue that the dependency thesis can be read in another, straightforward normative way and that this is sufficient to establish that self-respect does depend on social respect. The basic idea is quite simple. Members of society have a normative right to make their self-respect dependent on social respect (Alcoff 2006; Brownlee 2020). This means that they have a right to develop a conception of self which depends on others respecting them as contributing members of society. This right exists regardless of whether or not their self-respect psychologically depends on respect, just like in the case of freedom of religion. Even if someone can live a perfectly happy and fulfilling life without exercising a certain religion and even if they have absolutely no interest in becoming religious, they still have a right to freedom of religion.

The remaining question, then, is why should we assume that there is such a right to make self-respect dependent on social respect? The Rawlsian answer relies on the basic idea of conceiving of society as a nexus of cooperation (Freeman 2009). According to this idea, people are justified in developing a conception of the good in which their social cooperation plays a central role. It is natural to assume that for those people social cooperation becomes a central part of their self and that they want to be respected for their cooperative efforts. In other words, they want their self-respect to depend on being respected as cooperative members of society. Since cooperation is what justifies the existence of the basic structure in the first place, they are perfectly justified in

developing a conception of the good which involves making their self-respect dependent on being respected as contributing members of society. The fact that they might be able to retain their self-respect even if they are disrespected is of no consequence for this normative dependence of self-respect on social respect.

Even if it is established that self-respect depends on respect, the question that can still be asked concerns why basic liberal rights are not a sufficient social basis for self-respect. According to the Rawlsian argument, the claim that one should be respected as a cooperating member of society implies more than simply having equal basic rights. As Rawls (2001, p. 60) states, it also requires the realization of the fair value of political rights, fair equality of opportunity, and the difference principle. Rawls is not very clear about why he thinks that those principles are required, but Stark's (2012) interpretation of his conception of self-respect clarifies this point. The principles of justice are designed to ensure that everyone can respect themselves as members of society that make a socially valuable contribution to society. As stated earlier, I agree with this interpretation, which explains why self-respect depends on being respected as a member of society with equal standing. Citizens have a right to equal standing in the sense that they have a right to be seen as members of society who make a valuable contribution to society.

One might want to object that not all members of society do in fact make valuable contributions. Moreover, it can be objected that they do not make equally valuable contributions and therefore do not deserve equal respect. The reply to the first part of the objection is that contrary to the standard objection of excluding young children and disabled persons, the Rawlsian framework can be interpreted as demanding a basic structure which makes it possible for every member to make a valuable contribution. Moreover, according to this understanding, contributions are not reducible to economic cooperation.⁶ And there are basic structures where not everyone can contribute something valuable. A crass example is a society where persons with physical

6 For instance, people with severe disabilities can make various valuable contributions simply by making other people happy due to their personality. Rawls did not develop his theory in this direction and its contractualist grounds are a serious obstacle to doing so, which Martha Nussbaum (2007) and others have rightfully criticized. But I think Samuel Freeman (2007, pp. 107–108) is right to argue that the Rawlsian framework is not hostile to this very inclusive conception of cooperation.

disabilities are seen as non-contributing and maybe even cast out. However, if one adopts a very inclusive understanding of cooperation and assumes that every human being is worthy of respect, this just means that such a basic structure is unjust and needs to be replaced by another, more inclusive one.⁷

The reply to the second part of the objection is that the value of contributions should not be ranked, precisely because this would introduce status hierarchies that undermine basic respect and the idea of society as a cooperative enterprise. Instead, members of society should be granted what Ian Carter (2011) has called, albeit in a different context, opacity respect regarding their contributions. Opacity respect means that people deserve the same level of respect despite certain differences in the kinds of contributions they make. This kind of opacity respect ensures the stability of the cooperative social structure. Moreover, since cooperative contributions always also depend on talent and social preconditions, what counts morally according to the Rawlsian framework is the contributing effort and not its effect.

This is so because it is possible to conceive of different just societies in which different talents and personal properties are able to contribute more or less to the cooperative enterprise. Given this flexibility, the choice of a certain social structure is always arbitrary to some degree, which renders achievements as always also dependent on luck and never on merit alone (Neuhäuser 2021). The fact that the value of cooperative contributions depends on the arbitrary character of social structures reinforces the argument that contributions should not be ranked but instead should be subject to opacity respect.⁸

If this is true, the principles of justice and the basic structure of society need to reflect this right to be respected as equal members of

7 It is possible to make the argument of this paper while dropping the cooperation demand. What is crucial then for basic respect as being a member of equal standing is not cooperation, but membership alone. Such a position is advocated by Martha Nussbaum (2007) among others. I have strong sympathies with this position, but will stick with the cooperation demand in this paper, because its purpose is to make a case for limitarianism within a Rawlsian framework.

8 The idea of opacity respect might be seen as undermining the argument of this paper. If everyone has a claim to equal respect regardless of the value of the contribution, why is a limitation of wealth needed to equalize the reward of this contribution in order to express equal respect? Opacity already ensures equal respect, or so it seems. The rather simple answer is that opacity respect is a normative claim. Based on this, limitarianism contributes to a social structure that enables equal respect.

society regardless of the effective value of the contributing effort. In the next section I will argue that unlike basic liberties and fair equality of opportunity, the difference principle on its own is unable to secure equal social standing as a social basis of self-respect.

4. The Difference Principle and Equal Standing

Basic liberties are obviously important for protecting equal standing as a social basis of self-respect. Having the same basic liberties directly expresses equal standing. It might be objected that a very reduced set of basic liberties might fulfill this function. However, since basic liberties also secure the other primary goods and respect for the moral powers of citizens, they have to be adequate and not minimal (Schemmel 2019, 2021). Moreover, equal standing requires basic equality with respect to holding political and legal power. Political decision makers and judges are still citizens and as such have an equal standing to other citizens, not a higher one. An adequate set of basic liberties that includes the fair value of political equality can be understood as securing this equal standing against disproportionate forms of political and juridical power (Thomas 2018).

Likewise, fair equality of opportunity is obviously important for equal standing. It is only when everyone has a fair chance to work in certain occupations or in certain working roles that those positions are compatible with equal standing. Fair equality of opportunity ensures that every member of society is considered earnestly for those positions. And occupations and certain roles have to be designed in such a way that they do not undermine people's equal standing as citizens. Judges, for instance, do not deserve special treatment outside of the courtroom. At the same time, they do have considerable juridical power. If this power is properly controlled and functionally justified, then it does not undermine equal standing as long as everyone has a fair chance to reach this position. A controversial question raised in Rawlsian theorizing, of course, is what fair equality of opportunity entails (Sachs 2012; Lindblom 2018). But here it suffices to point out the importance of this principle for securing equal standing as citizens.

The same is not true for the difference principle though. At least in theory it seems to allow for a relatively high level of economic inequality if this leads to maximizing the economic welfare of the economically

worst-off members of society. If it is true, however, that a person's standing as an equal member of society is the social basis of self-respect, then it is not clear that maximizing citizens' economic welfare is what the worst-off themselves would choose and hence what would be chosen in the original position.⁹ Even if in an alternative scenario B the economic situation of the least advantaged members of society is slightly worse in purely economic terms than in situation A, they might still prefer this situation A where economic inequality is lower. The reason for this choice must not be an unfounded preference for strict economic equality or even some kind of envy, which might lead to levelling-down objections (Gustafsson 2020). The reason for this position might instead be the independent value of equal social standing as a social basis of self-respect. The crucial question for this line of argument, then, is why economic equality or at least strongly constrained economic inequality is important for equal standing.

The answer to this question depends on how this standing as an equal member of society as a social basis of self-respect is to be understood. I think at least two arguments can be made for believing that equal standing depends on limited economic inequality. The first argument rests on the importance of being able to participate in common social practices, which is needed to directly express the idea that one has equal standing. The second argument points to the importance of access to economic goods, which is needed to symbolically express equal standing. Both arguments together establish, or at least I think so, that the level of economic inequality should not be too high if the social basis of self-respect is to be protected. They do not establish a need for strict economic equality though.

The first argument against economic inequality emphasizes the importance of social practices for equal standing (Harel Ben Shahr 2018). If citizens are to have equal standing, it is not sufficient to have only basic rights and fair equality of opportunity. They also need to be able to take part in social practices that are seen as normal activities of people living in a certain society, regardless of whether they want to make use of this ability and take part in them or not (Alcoff 2006; Brownlee 2020). These can be all kinds of practices such as dining out,

9 For this reason, the method of reflective equilibrium calls for an intuition-based revision of the theory of justice.

going on holiday or visiting museums, the cinema or festivals. It can also be sporting activities or other hobbies, contributing to school activities for kids or outings from workplaces, or engaging in lifelong education. It is reasonable to assume, though, at least in market-based societies, that these activities and especially taking part in them on a regular basis costs a considerable amount of money. If it is correct that it is important for people to be able to fully take part in these kinds of activities, they need to have access to the necessary economic resources for doing so.

At this point it might be objected that this is not a problem connected with wealth or even with economic inequality as such. Instead, it is a problem connected with poverty, because people must not be prevented from taking part in important social practices because they do not have enough economic resources to do so. In other words, the minimum income should not be too far away from the median income. This objection, however, underestimates the relational economic character of important social practices (Hirsch 1977). If, for instance, the richest twenty per cent of society have much more money than the rest, they can create and engage in social practices that no one else can afford. They can also intentionally or unintentionally use their social power to present these practices as especially worthy of respect. In this way a status society is created in which the equal standing not only of poor people but even of the thirty per cent whose income is above the median income, but who do not belong to the rich, is threatened. To ensure that economic inequality does not threaten equal standing through status-conferring practices, an upper as well as a lower threshold is needed.

The second argument for the dependence of equal social standing on limited economic inequality is similar to the first argument. The difference is that in this case it is not important social practices to which people must have economic access, but status goods directly instead.¹⁰ Certain goods have a specific use value, which is the value of symbolically expressing social status. Having the title of doctor in philosophy is, among other things, a (hopefully) non-economic good that expresses (or tries to express) a specific social value of education and, in the minds of some people, intelligence and maybe even wisdom (Halliday 2016). Likewise, a Rolex watch or a Porsche car are economic goods which express (the value of) being rich. Often this judgement is

10 This is what Fred Hirsch (1977) has described as status-based positional goods.

accompanied by the impression that the owner must also be successful, a valuable member of society, smart and so on. Just as in the case of the doctoral title in philosophy implying wisdom, this impression might be wrong, but this is immaterial in terms of it being a widespread view. If such symbolic meanings of expensive luxury goods are widespread, they can become part of a status economy that threatens equal standing (Brennan & Pettit 2004). In a consumer economy where huge marketing resources are used to nudge people into buying these kinds of goods, the creation of status hierarchies and the exploitation of status anxieties make for a good marketing strategy.

Both arguments certainly depend on a number of empirical assumptions, though. Is it true that the described status hierarchies exist? Do people really ascribe symbolic meaning to luxury goods? If those practices and status goods exist, are they really so widespread that they threaten equal standing? It is not the task of this chapter to provide empirical proof for the thesis that status practices and status goods exist and undermine equal standing. Instead, the argument rests on the presupposition that this is the case and that it is conditional in this sense. It is still important to analyse the normative structure of the argument, which is the focus of this chapter, because everyday evidence strongly supports the empirical assumptions. Many people do have a keen sense of status and how it is expressed in hierarchical practices and symbolic communication in their daily lives (Frank 2020). Fights about status and status-related anxiety also seem to play an important role in the success of populist movements undermining the stability of liberal democracies (Cohen 2019). Moreover, the importance of many social practices and economic goods is hard to explain without referring to their status-conferring function. This evidence is sufficient, or at least I think so, to question whether the difference principle is well suited to securing equal standing or whether instead another principle that limits economic inequality more directly is preferable.

5. The Difference Principle and the Limitarian Principle

If economic inequality of a certain magnitude undermines equal standing as a social basis of self-respect, then the difference principle might be either deficient or not properly spelled out. Whether it is the former or the latter depends on how the relation between the social bases

of self-respect and the difference principle is interpreted. The difference principle is open to many interpretations (Van Parijs 2003). Here two possibilities are relevant. According to one interpretation, the difference principle is concerned with all five kinds of primary goods, including the social bases of self-respect. According to the second interpretation, there is some distribution of work going on among the principles of justice with respect to the primary goods. The first principle of justice secures basic rights and liberties as well as freedom of movement and free choice of occupation. The first half of the second principle ensures that “powers and prerogatives of offices and positions of authority and responsibility” (2001, p. 58) are distributed on the basis of fair equality of opportunity. The difference principle, then, is about income and wealth. The primary good of the social bases of self-respect is, according to this second interpretation, indirectly secured by all principles of justice and corresponding institutions. In other words, the fair distribution of the other primary goods by the principles of justice also secures the social bases of self-respect.

I think there is reason to believe that the second interpretation is the correct one, but will leave this interpretative issue aside, because it is immaterial for the argument made here.¹¹ This is so because in either case the difference principle needs to be supplemented by a limitarian principle in order to secure the social bases of self-respect and especially the equal standing as a contributing member of society. The difference is simply that according to the first interpretation something like a limitarian principle must already be built into the difference principle, which is simply not spelled out. The reason for this might be that Rawls is rather unclear about what self-respect requires. If, however, the proposal here is correct and self-respect does require equal standing as a contributing member of society, which in turn requires limited economic inequality, this leads directly to a limitarian principle as a strict requirement of justice, which is embedded in the difference principle. If the second interpretation is correct, then a limitarian principle is not

11 Rawls writes: “In a well-ordered society where all citizens’ equal basic rights and liberties and fair opportunities are secure, the least advantaged are those who belong to the income class with the lowest expectations” (2017, p. 59). He adds later on in relation to the social bases of self-respect: “These social bases are things like the institutional fact that citizens have equal basic rights, and the public recognition of that fact and that everyone endorses the difference principle, itself a form of reciprocity” (2017, p. 60). I think quotes like this hint at the second interpretation.

embedded in the difference principle, but the Rawlsian set of principles of justice are insufficient to ensure that the social bases of self-respect are secured. A limitarian principle needs to be added to make sure that economic inequalities do not undermine equal social standing.

In effect, in both cases a limitarian principle is needed to ensure that economic inequality does not occur to an extent that is problematic for self-respect. Having an upper threshold alone is certainly insufficient for this task and additionally a lower threshold is needed as well. In a discussion with Rodney G. Peffer (1994), Rawls acknowledged that it is implicitly assumed that such a lower threshold is met in a well-ordered society. In contrast to this, Rawls does not explicitly acknowledge the need for an upper threshold and a limitarian principle, which according to the argument developed here is an oversight. Such a limitarian principle needs to be part of the principles of justice in order to secure the social bases of self-respect. Just like with other abstract principles of justice, political institutions and public reason have the task of further specifying where the lower and upper limits have to be set in order to secure equal standing. According to the argument based on self-respect, this depends on what kinds of social practices and status symbols that create status hierarchies are present and widespread in a given society.

One remaining question is whether the limitarian principle should be understood as replacing the difference principle. If so, the distribution of income and wealth between the lower and the upper limits would be outside the scope of distributive justice. Instead, the limitarian principle could be understood to undergird the difference principle. In this case the difference principle would govern the distribution of income and wealth within the established limits. I do not want to take a firm stance on this issue here. The purpose of this chapter is to show the importance of integrating a limitarian principle into the Rawlsian framework in order to secure the social bases of self-respect. However, I want to make one quick remark on this issue: the advantage of the second proposal of undergirding instead of replacing might be that it is rather unlikely that in between a lower and an upper threshold of income and wealth no questions of justice emerge. Fairness might require maximizing the situation of the worst-off for the space between those thresholds. In line with this, Rawlsians can hold on to the incentive argument embedded in the difference principle (Casal 2017; Lister 2018; 2020). Within the limits of lower and upper thresholds the basic economic structure could still be

set up in such a way that people have an incentive to be more productive and inventive in economic terms in order to make more money, which would be beneficial for the economic development of the whole society, at least if the requirements of sustainability are met too.

This proposal of supplementing the difference principle with a limitarian principle within the Rawlsian framework is certainly faced with a number of objections. One objection appears to be especially in need of an answer for the whole idea to get off the ground. It states that there is not much space for inequality in the original Rawlsian theory and for this reason no additional limitarian principle is needed. According to this objection, Rawls is aware of the need to limit economic inequality (1971, p. 545). He simply believes that this is already built into his theory. The basic liberties and especially the fair value of political liberty together with fair equality of opportunity already imply a serious limitation of economic inequality, because stark inequalities lead to forms of social power that undermine the first principle of justice and the first half of the second principle of justice. The only way to effectively curtail this power is to limit inequality. Institutions that are designed to ensure political equality and fair equality of opportunity, such as a property-owning democracy, also restrict economic inequality (O'Neill & Williamson 2012). In other words, since a limitarian principle is an implicit part of the Rawlsian framework, there is no need to make it explicit.

What can we make of this argument? To be frank, I do not think that it is an objection at all. It is certainly possible that the Rawlsian principles of justice implicitly require a limitation of economic inequality. It might also be the case that the political institutions that are required by those principles already limit inequality to a sufficient degree. Alan Thomas (2018), for instance, argues that a Rawlsian scheme entailing a property-owning democracy will have very egalitarian consequences, because only then will the fair value of political liberty and the fair equality of opportunity be secured. My disagreement with inferring from this assumption that an additional limitarian principle is unnecessary is twofold.

First, it is not impossible that those principles can be satisfied in a way that allows for considerable economic inequality. For instance, it might be possible to secure the fair value of political liberty by decoupling the political system from economic influence through strict policies.

The USA, for instance, has very little regulation of political campaign contributions, while other countries have much stricter rules. It is also possible, to give another example, to tightly regulate the movement between holding a political office and gaining a managerial position in private industry in order to prevent revolving door lobbyism. Similar policies with restricting effects regarding the influence of money on educational and professional opportunities are conceivable. The more effective such policies turn out to be, the weaker the case becomes for reducing economic inequality based on the classical Rawlsian principles of justice. Since the question of how likely this is seems to be an open and at least partially empirical one, the need for a directly limitarian principle in order to secure the social basis of self-respect remains.

Second, even if the other principles indirectly ensure the limitation of inequality, the limitarian principle provides an additional and direct argument for such a limitation. Since the argument for the limitarian principle is grounded in the provision of the social basis for the important primary good of self-respect, it is especially forceful, at least within the Rawlsian framework. If it is true that self-respect rests on equal social standing and that equal social standing requires a limitation of economic inequality, then this makes for a strong argument for such a limitation. A variety of policies such as having an unconditional basic income, taxing riches, redistributing capital, and so on can be justified by using the limitarian principle as a requirement of self-respect if it can be shown that those policies are needed to effectively limit economic inequality.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to show that a limitarian principle of justice is worthy of consideration within a Rawlsian framework. I have argued that limiting inequality can be understood as a requirement for securing the status of all members of society as equal citizens. This equal status can in turn be understood as a social basis for the self-respect of people in their role as cooperating members of society. A just society has to secure the possibility that everyone can make valuable contributions and it must acknowledge the right of all members of society to be of equal rank as contributing members. This rank is ensured by granting all citizens equal status, which in turn requires limiting inequality in

order to prevent status competition and hierarchies and to enable all citizens to participate in status-expressing social activities.

This self-respect-based argument for limitarianism can be understood as complementing other arguments for limitarianism that are based on considerations of welfare, sustainability and (republican) democratic participation. At the same time, I think it has an additional role to play. If Rawls is correct in that self-respect is an important enabling condition for people to see themselves as contributing members of society, securing self-respect will in all likelihood enhance compliance with the principles of justice. This higher compliance will, in turn, make it easier for states to meet urgent needs, work towards sustainability and establish substantial democratic structures. In other words, implementing a limitarian principle can be seen as an important tool that can be used to work towards making societies more just.

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12. Climate Change, Distributive Justice, and “Pre-Institutional” Limits on Resource Appropriation

Colin Hickey

1. Introduction

In this paper I attempt to build part of a distinctive theory of global distributive justice in order to give an adequate account of climate morality. My primary goal, by focusing on issues of fairness regarding distributive shares of a particular kind of global resource, is to argue that individuals are, prior to the existence of just institutions, bound as a matter of principles of global distributive justice to restrict their use, or share the benefits fairly of any use beyond their entitlements, of the Earth’s capacity to absorb greenhouse gases to within a specified justifiable range.¹

Others in the climate literature have gestured in vaguely similar directions by offering principles of distribution (usually for emissions).² Peter Singer, for instance, has defended a form of egalitarianism about greenhouse gas emissions (Singer 2006). Henry Shue distinguishes between subsistence and luxury emissions, arguing that “emissions should be divided somewhat more equally than they currently are”

1 Though I won’t argue so here, I also think this serves as the *normative basis* for what distributively just global institutions to govern climate change would look like in allocating access to, or shares of, that resource and its benefits.

2 For some broader surveys on various principles scholars have considered see Gardiner (2004) or Caney (2012).

because it is not fair “to ask some people to surrender necessities so that other people can retain luxuries” (Shue 2014, 58, 64).

One striking feature about the inherited literature, however, is the frequency with which these views fail to clarify the implications of such principles for individuals’ duties (rather than collectives), especially in a setting prior to the existence of just institutions (what I will call “pre-institutional”).³ It is genuinely unclear whether they are offering arguments about what our “pre-institutional” duties are or only offering arguments about how our climate institutions should look (and then perhaps derivatively what our “post-institutional” duties of compliance would be with them).⁴

In this paper I hope to deepen the rationale—in light of our pre-institutional setting and with deliberate orientation toward individual duties—for the kinds of intuitions Shue and others in the literature correctly signal, but which have been left underexplored and latent.

I approach the task by revisiting, and drawing inspiration from, two prominent models from classical political philosophy for thinking about norms (rights, permissions, limits, etc.) regarding pre-institutional use of unowned resources generally; Locke and Kant respectively. The resource I’m directly concerned with, as mentioned above, is the Earth’s Absorptive Capacity (EAC), which is *the Earth system’s ability to absorb greenhouse gasses without dangerous perturbations to the climate*. EAC is a scarce, valuable, rival, non-excludable global resource that no one owns.⁵ All the manifold

3 Shue, e.g., is prone to drape his work in collective language, filling it with “we”, “the affluent”, or “affluent nations,” etc. (see e.g., Shue 2014, 49–51, 73, 76, 294), though he does recognize the need for an account of the transition and the end goal, p. 56–8, 73.

4 Many inside the climate ethics literature and beyond have thought that pre-institutional rights and duties with respect to resource appropriation are either non-existent or too unclear to deliver over any content, and therefore individuals, at most, have duties to support the creation of collective institutions to solve the problems of climate change. See Sinnott-Armstrong (2005), Kingston and Sinnott-Armstrong (2018), Maltais (2013), Johnson (2003). Elizabeth Cripps (2013) prioritizes promoting institutions in. It is also a central part of Onora O’Neill’s (2005) work that is skeptical of duties to support human rights outside of a context of institutional assignment. One notable exception to this trend comes, as I will discuss at-length below, from Christian Baatz (2014) who acknowledges the pre- and post-institutional distinction and claims that “from the moral point of view, even in the absence of institutions, fair shares exist.”

5 For a selection of others that discuss this idea see Shue (2014), Traxler (2002), Vanderheiden (2006), Blomfield (2013), Dolšák and Ostrom, (2003). While much

catastrophes of climate change arrive when (as is rapidly happening) this resource is used up and we emit more greenhouse gasses than can be safely absorbed—a possibility that unfortunately our extensive fossil fuel reserves allows for (see IPCC 2014 and 2018). We don't yet have property schemes suited to distributing this resource fairly and so it is a fruitful endeavor to look back to some of the basics about appropriating unowned resources, and fair shares, from the classical liberal tradition.

To be clear, I am not defending or endorsing either Locke or Kant's *overall* systems nor arguing that they offer adequate overall theories of distributive justice. Instead, I highlight them as a frame of reference to think about the pre-institutional moral problem. I extract specific and plausible resources they develop about basic pre-institutional rights, in order to ultimately make way for a preliminary account of distributive shares of EAC and the permissions, rights, and duties that attach to those. In Section 2, I consider the Lockean tradition and its focus on fundamental

more could be said of each of these features, which I take up elsewhere, it is worth mentioning a few things. First, the *scarcity* here is "functionally specified" by being indexed to a normative notion of safety and determined contextually within a specific time frame, with respect to a specific body of practices, and interdependent with some other networks of moral norms (so, while it is true that no matter what, there is a finite amount of GHGs that can be absorbed before temperatures rise 2°C, EAC would not be functionally scarce if, e.g., I were the only one emitting). Precise debates about this budget are complicated and I defer largely to the IPCC, but the account is not beholden to them and can serve as the right structural model for whatever the most defensible case is. This is a *global* constraint, given how the global climate system works. Moreover, EAC is *valuable* not intrinsically, but because of what activities it lets us do and what kinds of lives it lets us lead (if it weren't, it wouldn't be scarce). These are possible without EAC (which is a good thing for the clean energy transition), but just because it is fungible, that does not detract from the idea that it is valuable in a given context and contingently supportive of our most basic needs. It is *rival* not because my emitting stops you from emitting, but my use of the fixed and functionally specified EAC budget, qua scarce resource, does compete with others' use of the EAC budget. It is non-excludable, and hence a global "common pool resource" of the kind Ostrom describes precisely because it is difficult to prevent potential appropriators globally from accessing the resource (via emissions), which encourages free-riding. Finally, it is unowned in that we do not have recognized property regimes, private or otherwise, to manage the use, purchase, sale, transfer, etc., of EAC. Those more standard aspects of ownership entail things like the *entitlement or protected dominion to*: access, use, manage, exclude, derive income from, or transfer a good. There are no received mechanisms for conceptualizing any of those protections or entitlements (much less fairly assigned), regarding EAC, even if people certainly are using the resource. This is importantly not to say that there are no binding *norms* governing the use or benefit from the use of EAC in a pre-institutional setting; I'll argue below that there are significant binding norms, but they are not norms of ownership.

norms and rights of equality and self-preservation and how those can route to a preliminary account of distributive shares and pre-institutional duties. In Section 3, I turn to the Kantian tradition and its focus on fundamental norms and rights of equality and freedom and how those can route to a preliminary account of distributive shares and pre-institutional duties. In Section 4, I argue that drawing inspiration from these two views with respect to what absolutely basic pre-institutional rights individuals possess reveals a disjunctive account for why it is plausible to think that individuals have pre-institutional duties to restrict their use of EAC to within a justifiable range. Given the disjunctive account, I suggest that these duties are *at least as demanding as the less demanding of the two views*, and can be morally liable for repair upon violation. Both point in a similar direction regarding distributive pre-institutional shares that is more plausible than the position of skeptics who, in order to maintain their skepticism of pre-institutional duties, have to deny the basic pre-institutional rights to self-preservation or freedom. This overall picture comes with some fairly radical implications, especially for the well-off. Finally, in Section 5, I consider how targets of the duties of this purported minimal core might try to temper the implications of this disjunctive account and show why such attempts are unlikely to succeed.

2. The Lockean Model of Norms of Pre-institutional Resource Appropriation

In his *Second Treatise of Government* John Locke confronts the challenge of showing that property rights can be valid pre-institutionally (Locke 1963).⁶ The following section draws on Locke interpreters Jeremy Waldron and Gopal Sreenivasan to show how the Lockean employment of fundamental norms of equality and self-preservation generate rights to resources pre-institutionally that can serve as a minimal ground for sorting out fair distributive shares and restrictions on EAC use (Waldron 2002, esp. ch. 6; Sreenivasan 1995).

Locke thinks, plausibly, that we have a basic right to self-preservation. He comes to this through his theological commitments, that God created us and gave the world to us in common for “the support and comfort”

6 From here on I will refer to the first treatise as 1T and the second treatise as 2T and refer to paragraph numbers.

of our being.⁷ This source of normativity provides the basis for norms of pre-institutional resource appropriation. It does so particularly when combined with Locke's claim that we are all fundamentally moral equals.⁸ No one has superior moral status. We are all on a par. So unlike Hobbes's egoism, which in Waldron's words

"treats P's survival as a *sui generis* source of normativity for P, something which is normatively quite opaque to Q, and it treats Q's interest as a *sui generis* source of normativity for Q, which is normatively quite opaque to P"

Locke recognizes that the source of normativity of self-preservation in my case, your case, and all cases is the same (Waldron 2002, 157–8).⁹ This key aspect seems plausible, even if we balk at Locke's specific religious justification for the right to self-preservation.

Combining the points about self-preservation with the claim of fundamental equality provides Locke with a basic normative scheme. Everyone has a right to self-preservation. And because of the identical source of normativity for all regarding rights to self-preservation, other things being equal (i.e., when one's "own preservation comes not in competition") everyone is bound to preserve "the rest of Mankind" (2T 6). As Sreenivasan interprets this, he distinguishes between everyone's "natural right to preservation" and their natural right "to preserve themselves," which differ with respect to the corresponding duties they impose on others:

"In the former case, others have a duty to refrain from directly endangering the life of the rights-bearer; in the latter case, others have a

7 Regarding Locke's view on original communism see 2T 25–6. Locke thinks we are "sent into the World by [God's] order and about [God's] business" (2T 6). God's design has given us the right "to make use of those things, that were necessary or useful to his Being." God implanted us with the strong desire for self-preservation and "furnished" the world with things that are "fit" and "serviceable," for our subsistence as the means of our preservation to which we are directed by our senses and reason, by God's design (1T 86).

8 As Waldron has argued forcefully, this position about equality is also held on strictly theological grounds. Regarding Locke's view on equality see 2T 4 and 123. See also Waldron 2002, 6.

9 This doesn't mean that pre-institutionally resource appropriation has to be strictly egalitarian. Indeed, part of the very goal of the Second Treatise is to justify some "disproportionate and unequal" distribution. But it does provide the basis for constraining possible resource appropriation. See 2T 50 and Waldron (2002, 152).

duty to refrain from impeding the rights-bearer from actively preserving herself" (Sreenivasan 1995, 24).

The way we exercise and make meaningful such rights is by using natural resources. These are the *means* of our self-preservation. So the right of self-preservation ultimately refers to one's *share* of the means necessary for one's self-preservation. It is a right of access to such resources, without being denied or facing undue burden, which will be key to thinking about pre-institutional distributive resource shares (Sreenivasan 1995, 43). Given such rights, Locke thinks there must be legitimate ways for individuals to appropriate resources for rightful private use and benefit that were previously unowned without requiring, for instance, everybody's consent or approval by some political body (2T 26).¹⁰ Famously, Locke directs his attention to labor, which is necessary generally to realize the value of Earth's resources.¹¹ As Waldron puts it, for Locke, the significance of our labor is that, given the teleology of resources described above, it is "the appropriate mode of our participation in the creation and sustenance of our being" (Waldron 2002, 164). Or as Sreenivasan puts it, "property in labour's product may be seen as the actualization of a prior right to the means of self-preservation" (Sreenivasan 1995, 41). Within the rest of the framework thus far, Locke is in a position to show the constraints of legitimate resource appropriation by labor, which operate pre- and post-institutionally. These take the shape of Locke's so-called spoilage and sufficiency limitations, and his doctrine of charity.

The spoilage limitation comes from Locke's claim that "Nothing was made by God for Man to spoil or destroy" (2T 31). Waldron thinks this is best understood as a way of condemning acquisitions that "perish uselessly" in the possession of the acquirer. As he puts it,

"For *everyone* to be denied the use of them by someone who has no use for them himself, or does not propose to put them to human use, is a direct affront to the teleological relation in which each of us stands to the bounty provided by God" (Waldron 2002, 170).

10 Sreenivasan calls this the "consent problem" and sees it as Locke's central task to solve.

11 I can't settle controversies about why exactly labor confers property. See, e.g., Sreenivasan (1995, ch. 3), and Nozick (1974, 174).

Precisely how much this norm constrains individual resource appropriation or serves to condemn inequality depends on some interpretation. Given the advent of money and market economies, one can accumulate land and appropriate resources in far greater quantities than can be directly put to personal use, in exchange for money, which doesn't "spoil" in the traditional sense, like a storeroom of perishable crops (2T 46). So for the spoilage limitation to do work to condemn excess appropriation and inequality in modern economies, excess money must be able to be understood as "spoiling" in the normatively relevant sense. Waldron's interpretation allows for as much, though just how far it would go in counting stored wealth as spoiling is up for grabs.¹²

The sufficiency limitation owes itself to Locke's claim about resource appropriation being legitimate "at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others" (2T 27). Waldron understands this as a sufficient, rather than necessary, condition on the legitimacy of resource appropriation,

"highlighting the point that there is certainly no difficulty with unilateral acquisition...in circumstances of plenty but leaving open the possibility that some other basis might have to be found to regulate acquisition in circumstances of scarcity" (Waldron 2002, 172).¹³

In circumstances of plenty, as far as the rights of others are concerned, one's use does as good as taking nothing from the unowned resources and so can be legitimately used without their consent (Sreenivasan 1995, 48). When resources become scarcer, the possibility of prejudice to others' rights, particularly rights to the means of self-preservation, becomes more salient as do avenues to lodge complaints about the

12 It is also worth reflecting on the undergirding normative force driving Locke's insistence on productive use of nature's resources. In a world under constant threat of over-exploitation, or recognizing claims of non-human animals, an important recommendation might precisely be to not use resources for human purposes, or at least changing our interpretation of what counts as "productive" use (e.g., conservation, etc.). Still, the comparative nature of use/misuse/waste that Locke draws our attention to is instructive, even if what those categories get filled in with requires some reinterpretation. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for directing my attention here.

13 In conditions of scarcity, where not everyone's rights to self-preservation can be met, it certainly cannot be the case that no use is legitimate, which is one of the reasons why Waldron doesn't want to read the condition as a necessary condition on legitimate use.

legitimacy of use (Waldron 2002, 172). Resource appropriation violates rights to the means of self-preservation when one's use isn't in service of one's own self-preservation, but which could be used by others whose self-preservation is under threat (Sreenivasan 1995, 49). The sufficiency limitation therefore functions to "ensure that the material preconditions of everyone's right to the means of preservation remain firmly in place" (Sreenivasan 1995, 49). Sreenivasan's use of terms like "ensure" and "firmly in place" is worth noting, because they highlight an emphasis on the notions of *stability* and *security* of self-preservation indicated by the view.¹⁴ More than mere self-preservation, the right Locke is concerned with points to protections against being subject to constant threats to survival, where the rug could be pulled out at any time by significant and arbitrary powers.¹⁵

The final norm Locke employs to constrain resource appropriation by labor operates through his account of charity. Locke's view of charity is however very unlike contemporary views, which see it either as supererogatory or perhaps as a duty without a corresponding right. Instead, while called a view of "charity", Locke's view reads like a component of a theory of distributive justice. As Waldron puts it, the view

"requires property-owners in every economy to cede control of some of their surplus possessions, so that they can be used to satisfy the pressing needs of the very poor, when the latter have no way of surviving otherwise" (Waldron 2002, 177).

Locke speaks of such needy individuals having "a right" and "a title" to such surpluses, which "cannot be denied" to them (1T 42). It is wrong for individuals to withhold such surpluses and they cannot be said to be exercising their property rights. Waldron even makes the case that Locke thought this form of charity could be enforced by a state, and that neither the wealthy nor civil society could stand in the way and resist

14 Such values are important, e.g., in justifying the move from the state of nature to civil society governed by the rule of law (2T Chs. 1–4), and motivating his response to Hobbes, where he argues evocatively that accepting a Hobbesian Leviathan would not provide the right kind of stable and secure protection against known threats (2T 93).

15 This view resonates with the contemporary human rights literature, e.g., Shue (1996, 29), Beitz, (2009, 109), and Nickel (2007, 55–6, 76–7).

efforts by the poor to seize such surpluses (Waldron 2002, 182, 185).¹⁶ The qualification of having no other means of survival is important, however, because it applies only to those who cannot subsist through their own labor, and reveals that the general way to relieve poverty involves restructuring the economy to secure meaningful employment for all who can (Sreenivasan 1995, 42–3).

There, in outline, is the Lockean model for pre-institutional resource appropriation. Of course, Locke's account is thoroughly reliant on theological premises and so we might be skeptical that it can be helpful in our current context regarding climate change and EAC. I follow Sreenivasan in thinking that despite that fact, "the adoption of a secular outlook does not in the least diminish the contemporary relevance of the Lockean argument for private property" (Sreenivasan 1995, 6). This is centrally true because we can make good secular sense of fundamental moral equality among persons and basic rights to self-preservation of the kind employed by the Lockean model, which have implications for legitimate pre-institutional distributive shares and resource appropriation, and do so without requiring the religious teleology of resources.

However, before more completely linking the Lockean model (and its various resources) with climate change and pre-institutional EAC use, in the next section I present the Kantian model of pre-institutional resource appropriation.

3. The Kantian Model of Norms of Pre-institutional Resource Appropriation

We have, in the Lockean tradition, a view wherein pre-institutional distributive shares and norms regarding appropriation of unowned resources are determinate and normatively authoritative in light of our moral equality and rights to self-preservation. In this section, I look at a second model for thinking about these norms, inspired by the Kantian tradition, which takes moral equality and rights to freedom

¹⁶ Waldron (2002, 186) puts it nicely when he says that the prospect of starvation "short-circuits" complaints about the legitimacy of resource appropriation without consent.

as the grounding mechanisms—again with an eye toward extracting plausible resources for a preliminary account of appropriation and fair distributive shares of EAC.¹⁷

From the bottom up, Kant's view starts with everyone's basic right of freedom, which provides the central distinction with the Lockean approach detailed above. This right is often interpreted, at its root, as independence from being constrained by another's choice (Kant 2010, GW 4:446–7). As stated, this is too broad to be meaningful. Given that rights to freedom are reciprocal and, of necessity, mutually held by all, we can indeed be constrained by the choices of others (Kant 1996, MM 6:238).¹⁸ As Tom Hill helpfully puts it, rights to freedom are limited by "principles of justice, noninjury, contract, and responsibility to others" (Hill 1991, 48). The basic right of freedom is meant to protect, as Hill puts it, "certain decisions that deeply affect [a] person's own life, so long as they are consistent with other basic moral principles, including recognition of comparable liberties for others" (Hill 1991, 48). The important moral value of such protection is in being able to pursue a range of desires, interests, and projects in a way that can be construed as us making our own lives (Herman 1993, 178). Having such protection is to be able to live a moderately self-determining life with its own shape that isn't subject to the domination of others. For the rest of this paper I will take the key aspect of this basic right to freedom to rest in

17 I should note here that in defense of his version of philosophical anarchism, and critique of the possibility of state authority, A. John Simmons' heterodox interpretation of the Lockean position is closer to the following Kantian position by extending the grounding norms beyond self-preservation to freedom and self-government that require a fair share as large and as a good as could be simultaneously held by others. See Simmons (2001), esp. p. 138 and (1992), esp. pp. 274 and 281.

18 From here on I will refer to the *Groundwork* (GW) and *Metaphysics of Morals* (MM) with their standardized German pagination. Kant's equal basic right to freedom is meant to generate rights to bodily integrity, equality, as well as things like freedom of thought and speech. The core idea is that without a right to, e.g., bodily integrity, we couldn't exercise our right to freedom, unconstrained by the choice of another; we would be bound to them. Freedom of thought and speech, on the other hand, are implied because Kant thinks unlike physical force we can think or say anything, even if untrue, without affecting other's rights, or hindering their freedom, as they are free to believe or not believe our utterances. Of course, lying would be morally wrong, for Kant, but not proper part of the Doctrine of Right. Modern speech act theory and the current digital media environment might, of course, put some pressure on Kant, here.

its commitment to and guarantee of what I will call a certain threshold *sphere of effective agency*.¹⁹

In order to actually be free in this sense, we must act and pursue ends in the world. We need physical means to carry out our projects. We need a sphere of freedom, manifested in external objects, that is normatively (and empirically) protected from the interferences of others. But unlike, for instance, the right to bodily integrity, we cannot simply point to our bodies to explain intuitively what it is that others cannot encroach upon. Meaningful and effective agency in the world requires things external to ourselves to use, which need to be acquired (MM 6:248).²⁰ Eventually, Kant thinks that this will require the state, which is in some ways the central reason why he argues we need to leave the state of nature, and why with more space I would also argue that we have duties to participate in the creation of institutions of climate justice.²¹

But in advance of that, Kant thinks that when we combine our right to freedom as effective agency with the claim that it is necessary to use external objects to make meaningful that freedom, a series of derivative rights can be generated. These derivative rights Kant calls, rights to “empirical possession” and “intelligible possession”.

The former (rights to “empirical possession”) are the kinds of rights that allow us to condemn someone for taking away the apple I am holding just before I bite into it, or the shirt from off my back. In cases when we are literally in physical possession of some object, Kant thinks we can understand the claim that others not take it from us—in roughly

19 This borrows from James Griffin’s (2008) account of the justification of human rights, see esp. pp. 33–6.

20 Kant also here generates rights and claims of contract and role-based statuses.

21 This is what leads Kant to say things like “The doctrine of right wants to be sure that *what belongs to each* has been determined (with mathematical exactitude)”, which requires the existence of just institutions (MM, 6:233). As Anna Stilz nicely puts it, “any system of property will require the existence of a set of rules that is complex and to some extent conventional: rules about what sorts of things are eligible to be held as private property, what precisely are the conditions defining voluntary exchange, what constitutes an exploitative agreement, what are the conditions of publicly recognized spousal or parental rights, and how to distribute opportunities, education, and income. The conditions specifying these sorts of rights would be imprecise and difficult to judge in a state of nature” (2009, 40). I agree that meeting this standard requires the existence of just institutions, but that does not mean that pre-institutionally we are wholly in the dark. Lacking perfect determination and normative authority does not mean that there is no determination and authority.

the same way we can when we point to our bodies and make claims against others not to violate them.

But simple rights to “empirical possession” are obviously not sufficient to secure our effective agential freedom. We need more than mere protection against violation of objects we currently possess. We need some assurance, to pursue most of our ends, that when we place objects down their normative status is still as part of our rightful sphere, which others cannot encroach upon. So, Kant introduces another kind of right he thinks we have; rights to “intelligible possession”. These are the kinds of rights that allow us to condemn someone for taking the apple I was going to eat while I step away to the bathroom, or taking my shirt from my laundry hamper. Recognizing rights to such things is hugely important for securing a sphere of effective agency. Given that unilaterally using unowned resources takes them from the common stock and thus makes them unavailable to others (in both the empirical sense that they cannot make use of it and in the normative sense that they would have a new obligation to respect my acquisition), any intelligible possession potentially limits the freedom of others.

Kant makes sense of this by considering conditions on resource appropriation, claiming that “something external can be *originally* acquired only in conformity with the idea of a civil condition, that is, with a view to it and to its being brought about, but prior to its realization” (MM 6:264). Some attempts to use things, or claim some pre-institutional distributive share, are going to be ruled out by this, because they couldn’t reasonably survive ratification through institutions as we approach a “civil condition.” That is, some distributive schema obviously violate a notion of equal freedom and mutual protection of spheres of effective agency, and with it they violate notions of fairness and mutual justifiability. Anna Stilz provides a helpful reading of what this amounts to for Kant:

“For my possession of this particular object or piece of land to genuinely impose an obligation on others to recognize and respect it, it has to be something that they could agree to, viewed as free and independent individuals who also have a similar interest in holding property. And in order for them to be able to agree, my holdings cannot infringe their human right to independence: for if a regime of external property jeopardized this right, then their hypothetical consent would be impossible to obtain. This means two things: first, that my property rightfully extends only

to a “fair share,” one that is consistent with others’ exercising a similar right. And second, I am reciprocally bound to recognize others’ property once I have appropriated my own, for otherwise I would dominate them by forcing them to recognize a right in me that I am not prepared to grant others. My property rights, in sum, must be justifiable to others as free and independent persons if they are to impose valid obligations” (Stilz 2009, 43–44).

These conditions are especially important because Kant thinks that property rights come with a right to use, individually, coercion against interference to protect such property in defense of our external freedom (MM 6:233).²² Claiming a certain authority to use pre-institutional resources (with obligations that others not interfere and rights to defend against such interference) without reciprocally recognizing others’ rights to use by limiting one’s own use is a form of domination. It is a way of disrespecting the rights to freedom as effective agency of others.

4. Locke, Kant, and EAC

We have now seen two distinct models for starting to think about pre-institutional distributive shares and their connected norms (rights, permissions, limits, etc.) regarding an individual’s pre-institutional use of unowned resources. Both appeal to norms of equality to generate their schema, but while the Lockean picture pairs equality with rights to what is necessary for secure and stable self-preservation the Kantian picture combines equality with what is necessary to secure rights to meaningful freedom, interpreted as a sphere of effective agency. Each view is a general view about resources, but given the particular structure and function that EAC plays, as our resource of interest in the context of climate change, each view has plausible implications that indicate the existence of a determinate core of pre-institutional restrictions on EAC use, as a moral minimum. Addressing the implications drawing on the Lockean and Kantian pictures, in turn, I argue here that since either view is more plausible as a moral minimum than alternatives which are altogether skeptical of the existence of such duties, because

²² Kant says that “if a certain use of freedom is itself a hindrance to freedom in accordance with universal law, coercion that is opposed to this hindrance...is right” (MM 6:232).

the fundamental rights they trace are so plausible, we have a disjunctive argument for pre-institutional distributive shares that respect those rights and thereby for the existence of pre-institutional duties to restrict EAC use. As such, I take the more important theoretical controversy to be determining whether the moral minimum is where the Lockean view would place it or where the Kantian view would, and what that implies, given some individuals are falling below that minimum entitlement, in order to establish how demanding such duties are. The Kantian picture seems to presuppose the requirements for secure and stable self-preservation, but might extend significantly further depending on how much Kantian effective agency requires by way of material goods. From one angle, this may appear to make the Kantian picture more demanding because it requires that others are owed a higher standard. From another angle, however, it also has the prospect of protecting more of our own resource use. In the end, I hope to show that in our empirical context with respect to climate change, these differences don't amount to much.

4.1 Implications of the Lockean Account

Recall that for the Lockean one is only licensed to appropriate surplus resources when certain conditions are met. If those conditions are not met, then the resource appropriation is not licensed because it constitutes a violation of a negative duty owed to others against interference with their rights. In particular, the Lockean view issues restrictions on surplus resource appropriation when such use competes with the secure and stable self-preservation of others. As long as others are secure in their capacities for self-preservation, as a conception of pre-institutional justice and distributive shares, the Lockean view can tolerate significant inequalities. Yet as soon as the inequalities place some above and others below a threshold of secure self-preservation, where the surplus competes with the deprivation, the normative mechanisms of the Lockean-style view go to work.

Locke himself, appropriately indexed to his era, was largely concerned with land as a resource. Owning and working land was the quintessential way of securing one's self-preservation. The modern world is very different from Locke's world. Owning and working land is not the generalizable way of securing self-preservation. And

yet, Locke's theory is built around a basic norm that allows it to carry implications through malleable empirical circumstances. In the modern world, use of EAC itself functions similarly to land ownership in Locke's time. Using EAC is the quintessential way of securing the conditions for self-preservation. This is not a necessary fact (indeed, it better not be!). Conditions for self-preservation can be improved without EAC (e.g., with access to clean energy). And more access to EAC doesn't automatically improve conditions for self-preservation (similar, in that respect, to land ownership for Locke, whose value towards self-preservation also depends on other things). While we will always emit some greenhouse gases (if nothing else but to breathe), we need not structure our forms of life, institutions, and means of securing self-preservation (among other things) around doing so. This is the whole point behind radical decarbonization. The goal, in fact, is to get to a point where those low-level GHG emissions don't really, in any meaningful sense, count as using EAC at all because EAC is functionally specified as a "scarce" resource. Once we have a safe enough operating space, while it is still biophysically true that there is a discrete amount of GHG that could be emitted before raising temps, e.g., 2°C, it *loses its status as a normatively significant resource for appropriation and distribution*. All of that said, even if it is fungible and not intrinsically valuable (but instead as a means to what it lets us do and be) that doesn't detract from its value, contingently, in a given context, for supporting our most basic needs (to energy, but also tied up in everything from clean water, food, clothing, shelter, medical care, etc.). Empirically, in the real world as it is now, security in self-preservation is closely associated with EAC use and alternative uses of EAC compete with what could go (or have the benefits of the usage go) towards securing self-preservation.

There are hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people lack the conditions for secure self-preservation, which would be alleviated with more access to EAC use. Countless others use EAC for much beyond self-preservation. Furthermore, we know that there is a very tight global constraint on EAC use altogether. And lastly we know, given that EAC is a scarce global common pool resource, unlike many other resources, use in one corner does actually compete with everyone around the globe (and many of those into the future). My emitting GHGs doesn't prevent others from emitting GHGs, but my use of the limited and functionally specified EAC budget, qua scarce resource, does compete with others'

use of the EAC budget. Together, these elements indicate that the conditions which license one to use surplus EAC are unlikely to be met, which in turn recommends pre-institutional restrictions on using EAC for the modern Lockean.

At first glance, one might think that in such circumstances of scarcity the Lockean view points to a restriction on entitlements to EAC use beyond one's own self-preservation, until the self-preservation of others is secure. To do otherwise would be seen as violating one's negative duty to not interfere with the self-preservation of others. This would be a particularly demanding implication, and though it would certainly satisfy the Lockean provisos, and avoid wrongdoing, the full view is slightly more complicated.

When Locke discussed land, he was careful to make clear that meeting the conditions for licensed use (i.e., abiding by the provisos) didn't necessarily mean that land use was illegitimate unless everybody had a plot they could work for their self-preservation (Sreenivasan, 1995, p. 39). Locke's own position then wasn't then a right of each to use and own land, *per se*. One individual could have used and owned massive portions of land, employed people on it with a living wage, and not thereby threatened their rights to the stable conditions for their self-preservation, even though they were prevented from owning a share of land (Sreenivasan 1995, 51).²³

Taking that lesson to the modern context, the Lockean position shouldn't be understood as a right to or restriction on EAC use *per se*, and can take on the lessons of Pareto efficiency. Just like the person who used disproportionately large tracts of land thereby preventing others from owning it, but employed others on it with a living wage, it is possible that an individual's massive use of EAC could support or expand the secure self-preservation of others who were thereby prevented from using the EAC themselves. The fundamental operative norm for the Lockean is secure and stable self-preservation, and the actual distribution of EAC use is merely an important means of realizing

23 In Sreenivasan's hands this means that the land must be able to sustain at least as many people as if it were left unused (1995, 55).

that norm. Inequalities in EAC use only become problematic when they undercut that norm.²⁴

However, this should not comfort the status quo because most of us have clearly undercut that norm. What the above paragraphs tell us is that as long as some are not secure in their self-preservation *one must either restrict EAC use to only what supports one's secure self-preservation or use any EAC beyond that to support the self-preservation of as many individuals as it could have supported were it left to them.*²⁵ It is clear that our conditions are such that some are not secure in their self-preservation. While it is difficult to make general claims about what precisely is required for secure and stable self-preservation, if we look at any plausible measurement of development or the kinds of things we might investigate to assess how norms of secure self-preservation stack up, hundreds of millions, if not billions of people worldwide likely fall below that threshold. Nearly 750 million people live in extreme poverty on less than \$1.90 a day, hundreds of millions more live on less than \$3.10 a day (World Bank 2016). In 2018, about 2 billion people experienced moderate or severe levels of food insecurity (UN FAO 2019). Around a billion people lack access to electricity and 3 billion are exposed to dangerous pollution levels because of lack of access to clean cooking solutions (UN, 2020) and 400 million lack access to vital health services (WHO 2015).

It is equally clear that most of the global affluent meet neither of the two disjuncts that would make permissible their EAC use for the Lockean in a context where others are not secure in their self-preservation. While there are possible (perhaps actual) exceptions, the overwhelming majority of such individuals use more EAC than supports their secure

24 All those years ago, this is essentially the lesson from more recent debates between capabilities and resourcist views of justice generally, simply with different target norms (self-preservation v. effective agential capabilities). Equal distribution of resources can unfairly burden those who require more resources to achieve the same capabilities. See for instance Anderson (1999). In the climate literature specifically, see Eric Neumayer's (2004) work on how matters as simple as geography can affect emissions needs.

25 This doesn't restrict wealth accumulated outside the EAC use economy (through renewable energy or if compensated by carbon sinks), which would not violate the Lockean non-interference duty on the means of subsistence. But within the EAC use economy, this is likely in the range of only being entitled to retain the benefit of, given population estimates and total EAC use budget restrictions, at most a few metric tons of CO₂ per person per year as opposed to about 17 tons of CO₂ for the average American.

self-preservation. But it is also unlikely that they can plausibly claim that the *benefit from* their EAC use above that threshold is justifiably distributed to support the self-preservation of others thereby prevented from using the EAC (unlike the employer landowner).²⁶ And because of that, the Lockean view, which is concerned with equal fundamental pre-institutional rights to self-preservation in order to account for a preliminary picture of fair pre-institutional distributive shares, speaks with loud implications, condemning most of our EAC use as wrongful and in violation of the rights of those below the self-preservation threshold.

It is worth clarifying the nature of this proposed rights violation. Recall, going back to Sreenivasan, the Lockean view distinguishes between two aspects of the right to self-preservation. The first implies duties against directly endangering the life of the rights-bearer. One might try to argue that our GHG emissions violate this kind of duty. For reasons I can't address here, I worry this is an uphill battle. However, by splitting the right to self-preservation, the Lockean has another rights-based, distributive justice-oriented mechanism for condemning excess appropriation as wrong. The second associated right (to "preserve oneself") implies duties to refrain from impeding the rights-bearer from actively preserving themselves. And it is this right, in the context of fairly distributing entitlements to appropriate a scarce EAC that many millions could (and indeed would if given the opportunity) actively use as the means to preserve themselves, which appropriating surplus EAC runs afoul of.²⁷

Before discussing the Kantian account and comparing the two, the above elements of the Lockean view allow it to avoid a potential worry

26 While I don't have time for a detailed discussion on possible exceptions, thinking about what it would take to be such an exception is worthwhile in order to understand the full profile of one's duty and options (e.g., what is the burden of proof for trying to take the second disjunct and share the benefit? What limits might there be on the basis of other norms about power and domination, such as disruption to political equality, etc.?).

27 The Lockean account, with its central right and norms for permissible appropriation, encourages us to assess the status of our appropriation on the counterfactual of what *could* be made of any surpluses (not merely what would happen if we didn't over-appropriate), either by facilitating direct access to resources or sharing their benefits to those below the secure and stable self-preservation threshold. And this is true whatever the cause of people's deprivation below the threshold, whether it be lack of direct access to resources, neoliberal exploitation, disability, natural disaster, etc., any of which can indicate something about our surplus appropriation (with some exceptions for causes people are personally responsible for).

that has been lodged at others, like Peter Singer, for focusing too much on GHG emissions directly and not recognizing that distributive justice takes place in a broader context.²⁸ The Lockean view, as I have presented it, does widen our lens past exclusive attention in isolation to GHGs (or EAC, as it were) to focus on a full bundle of resources for what is necessary to support secure self-preservation. It is sensitive to historical contingency, and empirical variation depending on looming threats and available resources. However, just the same, those contingencies are precisely what allows us to say that, until there is some radical change in empirical context like a massive technological innovation or radical population shift, there is something at a global scale unique about EAC and requires us to be concerned from the perspective of principles of appropriation and distributive justice with the overuse of a *scarce, valuable, rival, non-excludable global resource that no one owns* and how it interfaces with basic access to secure and stable self-preservation. Unlike distributing a bushel of apples, which can be exploited and merely disappear for future use and benefit and then be replaced by pears or oranges, EAC is a resource that when over-exploited at scale doesn't just disappear for future use and benefit, it brings a legacy of climatic disruption thereby undermining future substitution strategies. This is part of the reason why EAC use has to be managed and deserves its centerpiece in the theory, even if the Lockean view can and should agree secure and stable self-preservation takes place within a broader network of resources.

4.2 Implications of the Kantian Account

Let me step back to briefly discuss the implications of the Kantian account (concerned with rights protecting a sphere of effective agency for a preliminary) for a pre-institutional, account of distributive shares of, and restrictions on, EAC.

While the Lockean can be sensitive to some inequalities (the asymmetry of power that certain forms of inequality in resource holdings generates can constitute a threat of domination that disrupts the security and stability of self-preservation even if their absolute holdings would be sufficient absent such domination), it is plausible that the Kantian

²⁸ David Miller, for instance, makes this point in his Tanner Lectures (2009, esp. pp 141–2).

account which highlights effective agency as its fundamental pre-institutional right is less tolerant of inequalities. The threat of domination or disruption to a sphere of effective agency appears before the threat of domination or disruption to secure and stable self-preservation. So, while the Lockean-style view might be able to tolerate relatively significant pre-institutional inequality while keeping everybody above the threshold for secure and stable self-preservation, it is much more likely that such inequality could disturb the Kantian-style view's aim of mutually attainable effective agency for all.²⁹

Derivative on that broader aim, the Kantian view will come to govern EAC use given its close association with—beyond mere survival—all aspects of people's freedom to set ends and pursue their projects. Just as the Lockean view can point to the countless masses who lack secure self-preservation, which would be alleviated with greater access to EAC, the Kantian will see that the broader aim of mutually attainable freedom as effective agency is quite clearly disrupted by contemporary distributions of EAC appropriation, and in virtue of that, some individuals must have outstripped their fair share entitlements.

Like the Lockean view does for its basic norm of self-preservation, the Kantian takes justification with respect to its norm of freedom as effective agency in a larger context than simply EAC use, even though it is the scarce, unowned resource that triggers pre-institutional norms of justice so as to not upset equality of freedom. So, a Kantian fair distributive share of pre-institutional resources need not mean maximal equal rights to EAC use and can similarly take on the lessons of Pareto efficiency. Some may require, for all manner of reasons, more or less actual EAC to be able to effectively express their agency and pursue their projects. But like the Lockean regarding self-preservation, if one uses a larger share than another it has to be justified in virtue of achieving consistency with or not undermining mutually held effective agency.

So, when someone uses EAC beyond what is sanctioned for mutually attainable effective agency (without sharing the benefits to support equal attainment for others) they will have violated pre-institutional principles of justice that apply directly to individuals which protect the basic Kantian pre-institutional concern for freedom qua effective agency.

29 Part of this is because the Kantian position is deliberately constrained with an eye toward a "civil condition" and what could be ratified through institutions.

In doing so, and falling outside one's fair distributive share, individuals encroach upon another's (or some other's) pre-institutional rights of distributive justice, which constitutes a wrong.

To see this more schematically, imagine the Kantian distributive scheme allots entitlements to the EAC budget (before dangerous climate change begins) between 100 people. Maximal mutually attainable effective agency might mean that some people get 1%, others might get .5% or 2%. If, on this basis, I am normatively entitled to 1%, but instead take 2% of the budget, I am taking something beyond my fair share that was allotted to another or some others. I can of course, descriptively, emit more GHGs, but this just takes additional percent from the EAC budget, either squeezing yet others out of a share, or contributing to shooting past the budget. Doing so outstrips my entitlement and normatively crowds others out from having their own fair share.³⁰ Other things being equal this disrupts the norm of equal freedom as I am now in a privileged, exceptional space, even if I can't know or identify who all is disadvantaged.

To reiterate, this is not an enforceable wrong by the coercive arm of the law yet because we are operating in a context where such institutions don't yet exist, but it may be appropriately condemnable through other mechanisms of holding to account (e.g., reactive attitudes) and the appropriate target of moral persuasion, nudging, education, etc. Moreover, this form of wrongful rights violation brings with it a residue, or normative link, that follows it until institutions are actualized where redress for the violation could potentially be legitimately enforced by the coercive arm of the law (e.g., in the form of a retroactive EAC use/benefit tax).

30 This isn't to suggest that someone's temporally prior excessive EAC use automatically makes it impossible for others to take their fair share because doing so would now overshoot the global budget. The causal and moral description of such overshoot can still rest on the fair-share violator, not the fair-share complier who happens, temporally, to be the contribution that crosses the global budget. Sometimes, however, the temporality can matter and someone's excessive emissions could, in principle, mean others can no longer permissibly take their initial fair share, as we think through not just primary duties, but secondary duties and duties to pick up the slack. It seems a virtue of the Kantian view that it can, structurally, accommodate this prospect, and both capture such duties and the unfairness inherent in them due to the initial noncompliance.

We might not be able to determine where the threshold for effective agency rests (and thereby what constitutes overshooting and encroaching upon others' rights) with "mathematical exactitude," as Kant ultimately aims. There is surely some ambiguous range as to what is required to meet that threshold for individuals. So, it is best to think of these kinds of pre-institutional distributive shares as prohibitions on resource appropriation/benefit as prohibitions against using more than would be allowable at the highest end of this range.

However, it seems even in its non-mathematically exact form, the Kantian account is already determinate enough to definitively rule out a rather wide range of resource appropriation. For example, obviously it would rule out all of the EAC going to those whose names begin with "H". So too, slightly more controversially, they would rule out existing distributive patterns. There is simply no way to justify, consistent with the demand for a threshold of effective agency regarding would-be users of EAC, as an unowned global common pool resource of the kind we have described, the notion that the average American could use more than 30 times the average Bangladeshi with parallel inequalities in human development.³¹

From this angle, the Kantian-style account may look to deliver a more demanding set of duties on, e.g., the average American than the Lockean-style approach; distributive shares and pre-institutional rights protecting a sphere of effective agency are likely more extensive rights protecting secure and stable self-preservation. However, given how the views are constructed, the story is not so simple.

One way to help clarify this is by looking at the following two graphs. Each represents a different possible world populated by four individuals and their resource appropriation. Also indicated is what resource allotment in the world would meet both the Lockean subsistence threshold and the Kantian fair share distribution.³²

31 The United States had an HDI of .920 in 2018, while Bangladesh came in at .614 (UNDP 2018). Meanwhile, for the latest year of population and emission data available the U.S. emitted approximately 30.7 times more per capita (U.S. EIA 2017). In some other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Niger, Central African Republic, Chad) that figure may balloon up to 100, 200, 300 times more emissions per capita.

32 The representation oversimplifies to draw out some lessons, because in reality the resources required to reach each threshold will differ from individual to individual.

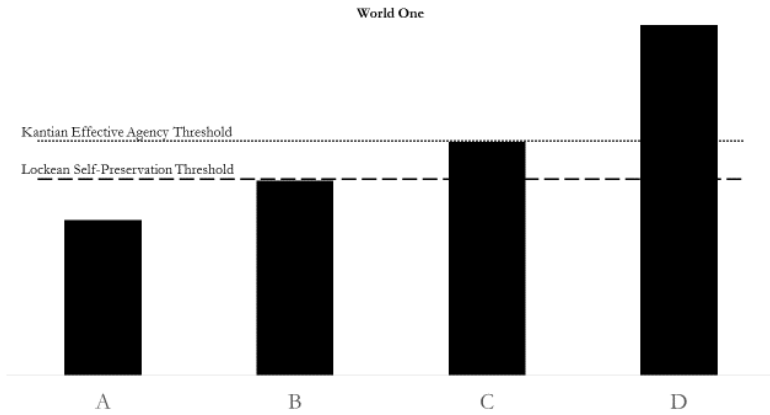


Figure 1. Comparing Thresholds: World One.

In World One (Figure 1), the Lockean analysis would suggest that C and D both have illegitimate holdings in virtue of A's deprivation and their surplus above the threshold of secure self-preservation. For the Lockean, the fact that B does not reach the Kantian threshold is immaterial to the analysis of rights and entitlements. But as long as A falls short of the threshold of secure and stable self-preservation, either through lack of access to the direct use of EAC or via the lack of benefit from others' direct use, both C and D count as violating A's rights and are called upon to relinquish their use or share the benefit from it. Furthermore, the fact that D has far more illegitimate holdings and could raise A to the Lockean threshold without C having to give anything up all the while still maintaining an overall resource advantage does not thereby entitle C to their own surplus (even though C is not beyond what would be their "Kantian" threshold). The surplus holdings of C are implicated because A and B have rights to secure and stable self-preservation and in circumstances of scarcity, such as the world presents, C's holdings are still proximate impediments to those rights being fulfilled. Finally, if C were to give up or share the benefit of some EAC to raise up A, then D, without giving up anything, and maintaining significant resource advantages would be back in the moral clear on the Lockean-style view.³³

³³ We may wish to refine the view so as to give C a claim against D for not contributing proportionally to illegitimate surplus use. This would push the Lockean closer to

The Kantian picture, however, would evaluate this world differently with respect to who is owed redistribution and who bears the duties to do so. The Kantian analysis would suggest that C is in the moral clear. C is entitled to their own holdings because they are within the range of what is required for C to achieve effective agency. C has therefore not illegitimately appropriated the resource and cannot be required to give up some of their holdings, even if doing so would raise another above the self-preservation threshold without simultaneously dropping C below that threshold.³⁴ On the other hand, the Kantian analysis would suggest that D has illegitimately used the resource. D would be required to disgorge whatever of their surplus portion of the resource (or the benefit from it) above the Kantian mutually attainable threshold is required in order to bring both A and B to the threshold for effective agency.

Consider, by contrast a second world (Figure 2), whose implications might already be clear.

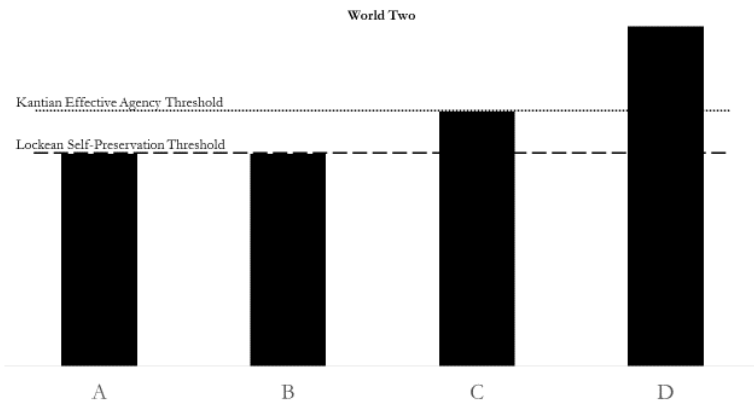


Figure 2. Comparing Thresholds: World Two.

In World Two, the Lockean analysis implies no pre-institutional redistributive duties. Everybody is above the secure and stable self-preservation threshold. From the Lockean perspective, the mere fact that D could eliminate some inequality and raise A and B to the Kantian

the Kantian's position, so is unlikely to disrupt the disjunctive argument I ultimately offer.

34 It might be beneficent, admirable, courageous, heroic, suggested by solidarity, etc. to do so, but it wouldn't be a requirement of pre-institutional justice. Moreover, C might still have duties to enforce the moral law and hold D accountable for over-use.

threshold, does not indicate any unfulfilled rights, wrongdoing, or generate any duties.

The Kantian-style analysis, on the other hand, would suggest again that D has illegitimate holdings; owed to A and B. Now, imagine that D relinquishes some holdings, so as to bring everybody above the threshold for effective agency but in the process expands their own capabilities to effectively realize their ends and so still maintains a comparative advantage. On the interpretation I'm offering, that kind of inequality is not problematic for the Kantian. However, it is possible that D could grow their pot of resources large enough so as to undermine the effective agency of the others, *even if their actual resource holdings don't actually change*.

It is worth drawing out these theoretical differences to better understand each view and how they operate, and much more could be said. However, we need not exhaustively dive into the details to generate a significant takeaway. While across possible worlds we can locate important divergence, in our current world, as it is, grappling with the moral problem of climate change, there is likely significant convergence between the outputs of the views. If one doesn't like the Lockean mechanism (which requires that others need only meet a lower threshold, but symmetrically also protects fewer of our own resource entitlements against the demands of duty) the way to distance oneself from it while still plausibly being committed to some notion of pre-institutional moral equality will be to move closer to the Kantian model (which requires that others meet a higher threshold, but symmetrically also protects more of our own resource entitlements against the demands of duty). But, in the empirical context of our climate duties, when we "crunch the numbers", so to speak, settling the controversy is not particularly necessary for action guiding purposes. I will say more about this below, but given how tight the global EAC budget is in order to reach the 1.5° or even 2° targets, how many users and would-be users there are, and how many people face threats to their secure self-preservation, the threshold for effective agency that is mutually attainable is likely not far from one's Lockean threshold.³⁵

35 In fact, the story might be more daunting. One recent study (Raftery et al., 2017) suggests that there is a 95% chance that we surpass the 2°C mark (say nothing of 1.5°C) by the end of the century and another suggests that even if humans stopped using fossil fuels immediately the earth will continue to warm by about 2°C by the end of the century (turning to 3°C if we continue apace for just another 15 years). This is to say that EAC, as such, may already be used up and any additional emissions are drawing a debt, or outstripping absorptive capacity. The theory I'm

In this I think we have a preliminary case for pre-institutional distributive shares of EAC and a disjunctive account of why it is plausible to think that individuals have pre-institutional duties to restrict their use of EAC, or share the benefits fairly of any use beyond their entitlement, to within a justifiable range, and can be morally liable for repair upon violation. The Lockean and Kantian accounts are not just because they come from prominent figures in Western philosophy, but because they highlight very plausible but distinct fundamental pre-institutional rights, which in the context of climate change and EAC serve as plausible preliminary accounts of fair distributive shares and the permissions, rights, and duties that attend such shares. Appealing to different fundamental norms, the models point in a similar direction that I contend surely is an advance on the “Hobbesian” skeptic of pre-institutional constraints to resource appropriation, precisely because they can reasonably be construed as taking pre-institutional moral equality seriously, while the Hobbesian can’t. Capturing a form of moral equality, even as narrowly proscribed and modest as the Lockean’s equal rights to secure and stable self-preservation, seems so foundational that it is plausible to see it as a condition of adequacy of a view. While more work might ultimately need to be done to settle the demands of each view and settle between them, for now we can tentatively conclude that our pre-institutional duties to use EAC are *at least as demanding as the less demanding of the two views*, and perhaps as demanding as the more demanding of the two views.³⁶

developing is meant to be forward- and backward-looking in a way that is consistent with the possibility that EAC is already used up. If so, then it is possible that even with everyone limiting their EAC use to the thresholds I’m discussing we still surpass the EAC threshold and then are in a tragic dilemma trading fundamental values. So what I refer to as “EAC use” might actually already be “excess use”. Other new research, however, still suggests that there are pathways forward to stay within EAC and avoid 2°C and even 1.5°C (Jacobson et al., 2017).

36 Though I can’t say more here, this partially normatively determinate core will need its penumbral features filled in and made fully determinate by institutional authority. Moreover, this invites questions about what companion duties attach to violations of EAC usage duties; call these *reparative duties*, which it seems could work on two dimensions that track common discussions of “mitigation” and “adaptation”. First, one might attempt repair by undoing one’s over-use by way of contributing back into EAC, namely adding carbon sinks and thus re-stocking the commons. Second, one might try to repair the overuse by directly alleviating harm from climate change or contributing to other adaptation efforts. I must leave the point for future consideration, but it is important for action guidance.

5. Demandingness and Priority to Disgorge

I want to briefly consider how we should think about the differences between the Lockean and Kantian accounts as they relate to duties to disgorge surplus resources (outside one's fair distributive share, pre-institutionally) and the demandingness thereof. Each view is a basic account of resource entitlements and legitimacy of using/benefitting without an explicit account of *degrees of wrongness* associated with illegitimate use or *priority to disgorge* resources among those with a surplus. Without filling in a complete account, there are things to say to better understand the conceptual space. We can help distinguish between these categories by reflecting on the extent and purpose of resource appropriation above the threshold for legitimacy (i.e., outside one's fair distributive share).

Let's look first from the perspective of the Kantian view. While it is committed to the importance of a threshold of effective agency, this presupposes as more basic the lower Lockean style threshold of secure self-preservation. Because of this, if we imagine a third world (Figure 3, below) of supreme scarcity where circumstances don't admit of securing the threshold of effective agency for all and some others aren't even secure in their self-preservation, even the Kantian will have strong reason to suggest people give up resources that are in service of securing effective agency for securing self-preservation. This is one way of narrowing the gap between the views in context.

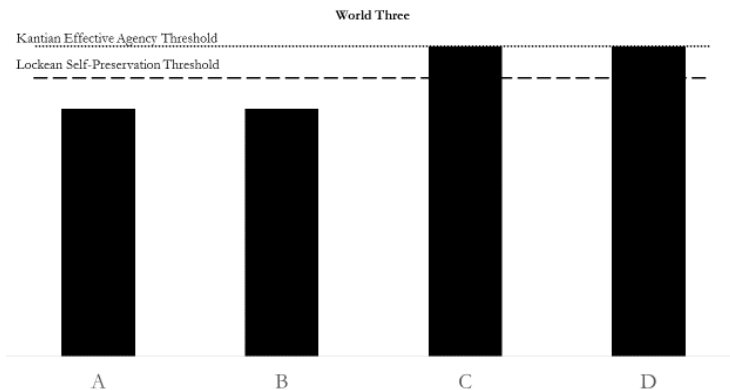


Figure 3. Comparing Thresholds: World Three.

Now consider things from the perspective of the Lockean. If we go back to World One, the Lockean is committed to the idea that both C and D are illegitimately using surplus resources. However, there is no reason for the Lockean to deny (indeed very good reason for them to accept) the extremely important moral value of effective agency. Because of this, the Lockean has avenues to suggest that D is in a worse position and priority to disgorge should fall on them first. They are holding on to more resources that are in service of things of less moral value. This is yet another way in which the gap narrows between the two views.

Just as the Kantian threshold can sometimes provide some buffer against the wrongness of, and priority to disgorge, surplus use past the Lockean threshold, we might wonder whether there are morally significant values attached to other purposes for surplus use beyond securing effective agency that serve a similar function. The disjunctive view I have presented has the potential to be very demanding, and those concerned about demandingness are likely on the lookout for other moral values to buffer against the demands of what they will have to sacrifice. In principle it does seem as though there are important additional distinctions to make. Even if everybody is above the threshold for effective agency it seems worse and a higher priority for disgorgement when people use their surplus in ways that are completely wasteful or merely pursuing pure preference-satisfaction or hedonic fun than if they use it to contributing to meaningful, identity-shaping projects. The latter can be deeper and more significant moral values (though they are not always as neatly separable, given that identity-shaping projects contribute to what counts as preference satisfaction and pleasure, and vice versa). I want in no way to deny the possibility of such distinctions, even if it would take more work to argue about how they stack up. I do however want to maintain that if in fact we think, as we should, there is a baseline of morally vital considerations like the Lockean or Kantian thresholds to which everyone has an entitlement, it is implausible to think that these kinds of admitted moral values could override the demand to disgorge. To do so would be to violate the most basic form of reciprocity that we sketched by Anna Stilz above. To do so would be to deny to others what you think would be minimally required for yourself. The world we currently inhabit, unfortunately, is one in which these distinctions largely get swamped out in generating a relatively clear sense of the kinds of demanding action required of those worried

that these distinctions might make a difference to them. There are such huge numbers of individuals falling below either threshold that the reductions in, or benefit sharing of, EAC are so large they will cut against waste, luxury, pure hedonic pursuits, and deeply meaningful projects of vast swaths of the global affluent, who are each (from the global perspective) positioned more like D than C in World One.

So when scholars attempt to raise issues of demandingness as potential defeaters of duties, or engage with Henry Shue's distinction between "subsistence" and "luxury" emissions to try to find where the line sits at which their resource holdings are protected against, I want to suggest it is implausible if they arrive at a picture very close to the status quo.

This is an important point at which my view intersects with the other main view to explicitly attend to the pre-institutional/post-institutional distinction with respect to distributive justice. As I mentioned above, Christian Baatz agrees that, "from the moral point of view, even in the absence of institutions, fair shares exist" (Baatz 2014, 3). In light of this, Baatz is also concerned with trying to specify what duties individuals have, and comes to the conclusion that they have the duty to "take already available measures to reduce emissions in their responsibility as far as can reasonably be demanded of them" (Baatz 2014, 15). As he interprets it, emissions reductions can be "reasonably demanded" insofar as

"an action generating GHG emissions either (a) has no moral weight or (b) an alternative course of action (that is to be considered as an adequate substitute) causing less emissions exists" (Baatz 2014, 15).

Baatz pitches this as a "first approximation" and, in a reply to critics, seems to suggest that these should be taken as what can be reasonably demanded "at minimum" (Baatz 2016, 161).³⁷ This is an important clarification because, if taken as exhaustive, these two conditions risk failing to adequately capture everything that could be reasonably demanded of people, and which duties should actually attach to "fair shares." There are genuine questions about whether we would be able to reach our targets of reducing global emissions (from 2010 levels by

³⁷ Though it is hard to figure out exactly what Baatz means because in the reply he only refers explicitly to the "no moral weight" claim being what can "at minimum" be demanded, and not the "adequate substitute" claim. So if the latter were the only reasonable additional demand, then our disagreement would be more significant.

about 45% by 2030 and to net zero by 2050), if all of the emissions that cleared these standards were protected against the demands of duties to be reduced or eliminated (IPCC 2018, 14).

For one, very few emissions actually have no moral weight. Many of our emissions are caught up in our projects and ends that are deeply autonomy enhancing, identity-constituting, and meaningful. They facilitate familial obligations. They support the bonds of friendship. They satisfy deep and enduring preferences. Even the highest luxuries have *some* moral weight. At the very least they can be sources of pleasure, which is a morally significant feature. So, if we can only reasonably demand those emissions that have *no moral weight* be reduced/eliminates, the list might be quite small. This worry can be somewhat mitigated if we interpret Baatz as meaning “justice-relevant” moral value, which some of the categories above might not have, which would generate further reasonable demands. Doing so would require an account of what values are “justice-relevant,” but would be an important step in filling out the gap left by Baatz’s preliminary account that could be put into further conversation with the Lockean-Kantian account I develop here.

It is also worth remarking on Baatz’s second condition. He doesn’t provide a ready-made interpretation for what would count as an “adequate substitute”. Trying to fill it in runs into potential difficulties quickly. Intuitively, if I live in Florida and do all city/highway driving, it seems like a fuel-efficient car might be an adequate substitute for driving a gas guzzling Jeep. But imagine I live in the mountains of Colorado and do significant off-roading. It is less clear switching to a hybrid would be an “adequate” substitute. This ambiguity, which depends on the plurality of values involved in our decision-making, has the potential to multiply through many of our behaviors. This connects to a broader point, which is just to say that even if we have switched to the least-emissive substitute for a given action, behavior, or activity we aren’t licensed to infer that such emissions are legitimate. We might have to drop them altogether to abide our fair share. What I think this reveals is that there is a lot more work to be done than where Baatz leaves us, but it also might direct our attention away from “substitution” specifically and towards overall entitlements closer to the picture I have been painting with the Lockean-Kantian account.

Ultimately, seeing Baatz's account as a preliminary take about what is required "at minimum" invites us to investigate further what other, additional kinds of demands might be reasonably made. Exactly how far he would be willing to go is an open question. When clarifying, in his Reply to Critics, that the conditions he sketched were what could be reasonably demanded at a minimum, Baatz still refers to his view as a "permissive" account, which suggests that the view really is designed to offer more protections than existing accounts of climate duties (Baatz 2016, 165). This makes sense when we situate it in the broader picture that is central to Baatz's account, which is to foreground how dependent our emissions are on the "carbon-intensive structures" we are embedded within (Baatz 2014, 10). With respect to our emissions entitlements and the duties that attach to them, his basic orientation is that the more dependent our emissions are on structural features around us, the less we can be asked to give them up.

So however Baatz might eventually fill in the story from the preliminary account, it is almost sure to be more permissive than the Lockean-Kantian account I have been developing here. Just as the Kantian threshold for effective agency protected more of our own resource entitlements against the demands of duty than the Lockean, Baatz's ultimate account would almost certainly protect even more than that in virtue of how they depend on external structures. These are good arguments to have out.

But I will close with a few final notes that I suggest are in my favor. First, once we have made the move to talking about EAC rather than emissions, *per se*, we will be able to question the very idea that having one's *emissions* dependent on structures is the kind of thing that could defeat one's duties of distributive justice. Some of one's *emissions* might depend on carbon-intensive structures that cannot be avoided without threatening to disrupt the Lockean or Kantian norms, but that doesn't mean we are entitled to the use of the EAC. Given that we can use and, to some measure, replenish EAC, it seems plausible that even if we are forced into emitting more carbon due to intensive structures, the principles of justice aren't simply defeated. One might, for instance, be bound to replenish EAC in other ways (e.g., offsetting), as compensation. Dependence on structures, then, isn't the normatively fundamental feature which should toggle or

temper demandingness. Instead it should be, I suggest, our abilities with respect to using EAC and our vulnerabilities with respect to the Lockean/Kantian thresholds.³⁸

But there are also further general reasons to be skeptical of any companion views that might attempt, via alternative routes, to similarly protect more of our EAC use from the demands of duty than the Kantian threshold, given the moral problem we face in climate change. These reasons ultimately boil down to the fact that settling moral duties in this domain occurs in conditions of uncertainty. Like every such case there is an element of moral risk involved. Of course, there could be a technological magic bullet that eliminates vulnerability below the Lockean self-preservation threshold or expands the sphere of mutually attainable Kantian effective agency to mitigate the demandingness of the duty. While that possibility needs to be balanced in the all things considered determination of the duties, the overwhelming weight of the uncertainty and moral risk is on the other side, such that even upon interpreting the Lockean and Kantian threshold rather thinly we likely still face the prospect of tragically more people falling below them. I will raise three in particular here.

The first is what happens when we consider population projections over the next century. The UN World Population Division projects, using their “medium fertility” models, that by 2050 there will be 9.7 billion people on the planet. By 2100 that figure goes to nearly 11 billion, adding more than three billion people in “less developed regions” from current population figures (UN DESA 2019). These numbers significantly increase the likelihood that there will be people falling below the Lockean threshold in order to trigger its implications for those above it. But moreover, it shows us that we need to be wary of how expansively (regarding EAC heavy features) one could interpret

38 There may be other, structurally similar, ways to try to defend an account that is more permissive than mine. One could try to identify other important values that generate strong individual rights entitlements that can be permissibly claimed even if others are seriously deprived. Something like Martha Nussbaum’s (2009) capability list (if truly pluralistic, irreducible, incapable of being prioritized or traded off) might be one such avenue. The issue is that in radically non-ideal settings, when such capabilities aren’t all mutually satisfiable (which I think is very plausible globally in the context of climate change), a theory should have the normative resources to prioritize. The Lockean and Kantian accounts are well-positioned to be the most fundamental values to adjudicate conflicts or prioritize in such a non-ideal world.

secure self-preservation or effective agency that is mutually attainable (or some other fundamental norm), given an increase in the number of individuals needing a fair share, so as to not completely overshoot the global budget with increasing populations.³⁹

A further reason to doubt the plausibility of more permissive assessments of what individuals are allowed to use in the wake of the problem we face involves probability assessments regarding actually staying within the EAC budget. The IPCC AR5 figures requiring 40–70% emissions reductions by 2050 and 100% or further by 2100 all leave as much as a 33% chance that even accomplishing such reductions we surpass the, already overly-conservative, 2°C threshold of dangerous climate change. To increase the probabilities, for a yet smaller target at 1.5°C, requires an even smaller global budget, which translates in to smaller mutually attainable shares. As such we are further unlikely to be able to count, as normatively protected, the kinds of emissions that more permissive views might want in order to mitigate the demandingness of the duty without making it significantly less probable, or even impossible to hit such targets.

These are not going to be easy conclusions for many to accept. Our lives are structured to use EAC far beyond the Kantian's more permissive threshold in their quotidian details but also to build bonds of friendship, engage in meaningful work and identity crafting activity, pursue necessary recreation from life's stresses, etc. Unfortunately, even more foundational moral norms are at stake.⁴⁰

6. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have argued that individuals are, pre-institutionally, bound as a matter of global distributive justice to restrict their use, or share the benefits fairly of any use beyond their entitlement, of

39 For more on this, and some thoughts about how to prevent population increases from completely swamping out our ability to deal with climate change see Hickey, Rieder, and Earl (2016).

40 Not every activity that the globally affluent engage in will get undermined by this position. But the norms to which those activities are beholden are in service of securing the Lockean-Kantian thresholds. We still need resources going to climate science and adaptation efforts. This will require flights around the world. Even wealthy places like NY or Florida might be entitled to sea walls, etc. to prevent their situation becoming precarious and fragile.

the Earth's capacity to absorb greenhouse gases (EAC) to within a specified justifiable range. While I can't defend the claim here, it is also worth seeing how this kind of argument can serve as the *normative basis* for what distributively just global institutions to govern climate change would look like in allocating access to, or shares of, that resource and its benefits—thereby translating authoritative but more coarse-grained pre-institutional *moral* prohibitions, requirements, and permissions regarding distributive justice into specified, fully determinate *institutional* ones. This kind of translation is important for bringing not only the specification, coordination, and enforcement of duties that institutions uniquely provide, but in doing so ultimately will help make it less arduous for many individuals to fulfil their duties of distributive justice, given greater compliance and social support.

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13. Ecological Limits: Science, Justice, Policy, and the Good Life

Fergus Green

1. Introduction

From claims of “peak oil” and climate “tipping points” to proposals for climate stabilisation goals and “planetary boundaries”, recent years have witnessed a revival of scientific and political discourse concerning the notion of ecological limits (Dobson 2016). The climate crisis and a plethora of other ecological concerns have prompted philosophers, too, to make various kinds of claims about ecological limits. Reviewing these claims, one is struck by their diversity. Ecological limits receive expression in terms of widely varying normative vocabularies, from theories of “natural resource justice” (Armstrong 2017) to “capability ceilings” (Holland 2008), from an “ethos of restraint” (Hayward 2009) to “personal carbon allowances” (Hyams 2009). The purpose of this article is to review and bring some order to this complex array of material, and to suggest some promising paths forward.

I classify ecological limit claims, at their broadest level of generality, along two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the *type of limit claim*, which I divide into two categories: *descriptive*; and *normative*. I subdivide the descriptive category into *resource limits* and *system limits*, and the normative category into *distributive justice*, *institutional/legal reform*, and *the good life*. The second dimension is the *level* at which the limit is posited (Spengler 2016, 927). For the purpose of this analysis, I divide this into two discrete categories: *individual-level* and *aggregate level*, recognising that the latter encompasses a wide range of possibilities between the

planetary level and a multiplicity of lower-level collective units (e.g. national-level, ecosystem-level, etc.). These dimensions are represented in the headings of Table 1, below, with each cell populated with an example. I should emphasise that this is not the only way of carving up the terrain. In particular, the normative categories inevitably overlap somewhat. Nonetheless, I have tried to capture significant functional differences in the types of theorising that has been done on ecological limits. A possible third dimension, applicable to normative claims, is their ideal vs non-ideal nature, understood here as their degree of “fact-sensitivity”. I will touch on this issue where relevant in my discussion of normative work.

Table 1: Typology of ecological limit claims, with examples

Claim type		Descriptive		Normative	
Level	Resource limits	System limits	Distributive justice	Institutional/legal reform	The good life
Aggregate	Limited stocks of oil	Climate tipping points	Implied aggregate limits on natural resource use	Legislated national greenhouse gas emissions limits	Ethos of restraint; Anti-fossil fuel norms
Individual	n/a	n/a	Capability ceilings; Functioning constraints	Legislated personal carbon allowances	Environmental virtues

Beyond its conceptual-clarificatory function, this framework is used to structure this article. Part 2 discusses descriptive claims. These are claims about what the world is actually like, i.e. claims that there are real, *biophysical limits*. I review some recent prominent claims that there are biophysical limits, placing these in the context of historical discourse on environmental limits dating back to the 1970s. In light of this discussion, I identify and describe the two sub-categories of biophysical limit claims mentioned above (resource limit and system limit claims), before discussing some key philosophical issues concerning the (contested)

status of such claims, with an eye to their implications for normative theorising.

In Part 3, I review proposals for ecological limits in normative theorising, structured according to the above-mentioned subcategories (distributive justice; institutional/legal reform; and the good life). There is a voluminous literature on normative theory concerning the environment. This review is limited to those works that specifically invoke the notion of upper limits on ecological exploitation (or similar). Maintaining this boundary-line has proven easier with respect to theories of justice (section 3.1) and institutional/legal proposals (section 3.2) than is the case with regard to the more aretaic and teleological constructs discussed in section 3.3. Accordingly, section 3.3 is shorter and more synoptic than the other two sections in Part 3, and serves as more of a portal into wider conversations in environmental ethics than a review of specific proposals. Part 4 concludes with some suggested directions for future research.

2. Descriptive Claims about Ecological Limits

2.1 Setting the Scene: Some Prominent Claims about Biophysical Limits

The notion of ecological limits came to prominence in the 1970s following publication of the influential report by the Club of Rome, *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1974). The report uses a computerised systems analysis methodology to model global development scenarios that capture interactions between variables relating to five “trends of global concern”: “accelerating industrialization, rapid population growth, widespread malnutrition, depletion of non-renewable resources, and a deteriorating environment” (ibid 21). The authors first modelled a “business as usual” scenario up to the year 2100, finding the *depletion of non-renewable resources* to be the feature that determined eventual system collapse. The standard sceptical response was that the stock of non-renewable resources is likely to be larger, and used more efficiently, in the future than what was known at the time (e.g. due to improvements in science and technology) (see Dobson 2016, 290). In response, the authors doubled the assumed stock of resources.

The model still projected economic collapse—albeit this time the determinative constraint was *environmental pollution* resulting from the additional economic production growth enabled by the larger assumed stock of natural resources (e.g. overuse of land causes erosion, which causes a decline in food production) (Meadows et al. 1974, 141).

The Limits to Growth was subjected to critique from various quarters (see Dobson 2016, 291–96), which “were convincing enough to push the idea from center stage for much of the 1990s” (ibid 297). However, the notion of biophysical limits has returned to prominence in various forms in the 21st century (ibid 297–301). It is instructive to consider perhaps the most influential contemporary variant of the notion of biophysical limits at the planetary scale: the *Planetary Boundaries framework*.

In a series of influential papers, Johan Rockström, Will Steffen and colleagues (Rockström et al. 2009a; Rockström et al. 2009b; Steffen et al. 2015) develop the notion of “planetary boundaries” to guide human activities in coupled human–environmental systems with a view to ensuring that biophysical conditions remain conducive to human development in the way that they have during the Holocene era. The authors identify nine relevant systems and associated response variables: climate change; biosphere integrity (functional and genetic biodiversity); land-system change; freshwater use; biochemical flows (phosphorous and nitrogen); ocean acidification; atmospheric aerosol loading; stratospheric ozone depletion; and “novel entities”¹ (Steffen et al. 2015). Intrinsic to these systems, the authors posit, are *thresholds*: points at which some biophysical variable of interest (the “response variable”) undergoes a non-linear transition in its functioning (Rockström et al. 2009b, 2). It is these thresholds that constitute descriptive ecological limit claims insofar as they posit the existence of a real biophysical phenomenon. By contrast, the *planetary boundaries* the authors define are human-constructed limits to relevant “control variables” for each system, determined in relation to scientific knowledge about the relevant thresholds. The planetary boundaries are informed by normative judgements regarding matters such as what is an acceptable degree of risk to human development of crossing

1 Novel entities are defined as “new substances, new forms of existing substances, and modified life forms that have the potential for unwanted geophysical and/or biological effects” (Steffen et al. 2015, 7).

a threshold, given scientific uncertainty over the precise location of the threshold (Rockström et al. 2009b, 3–5).²

Consider climate change as an example to illustrate the framework. The authors' proposed climate change boundary aims to avoid crossing thresholds that trigger "highly non-linear, possibly abrupt and irreversible" changes in various response variables, such as the collapse of the thermohaline circulation³ (ibid 9). One of the two proposed control variables is the concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere, for which the authors suggest a planetary boundary of 350 parts per million (ppm), representing the lower bound of the zone of uncertainty regarding the location of the threshold (Rockström et al. 2009b, 10; Steffen et al. 2015, 2). The fact that CO₂ levels are well in excess of the boundary (as of 2020 they exceeded 410ppm) is one of the principal concerns motivating contemporary scientific, political and philosophical discussions of ecological limits.

2.2 Two Kinds of Biophysical Limit Claims

In light of the foregoing discussion, we can distinguish two generic types of biophysical limit claims. The first type is a claim about *the finite availability of a natural resource stock or flow*. I call this type of claim a *resource limit claim*. A common example is a claim about the limited stock of a non-renewable natural resource, like oil. Resource limit claims are more intuitive to understand, since they invoke a layperson's sense of what it is for something to be limited. Natural resources are part of larger ecological systems, the processes of which may replenish certain natural resources over timelines relevant to humans. The availability of such "replenishable", or "renewable", natural resources is thus time-dependent. For example, there may be a limit to the amount of timber in a forest available for harvest *this year*. The availability of such resources is also *system-dependent*. To continue the example, more timber

2 Because the identification of thresholds is subject to uncertainty, the authors propose planetary boundaries at the lower end of the identified zone of uncertainty (correctly acknowledging that this implies a normative—specifically, a conservative—approach to risk) (Rockström et al. 2009b, 473).

3 This process acts as a conveyor belt of warm surface water to the polar regions, and plays a key role in regulating the local climate in various parts of the world: see, e.g., <<https://gpm.nasa.gov/education/videos/thermohaline-circulation-great-ocean-conveyor-belt>>.

will become available for harvest in a later year, *so long as the relevant ecosystem remains intact*.

The system-dependence of natural resources provides one important motivation for protecting ecological systems: if a resource is overexploited or the relevant system otherwise excessively perturbed, its capacity to replenish natural resources may diminish or be destroyed. Other instrumental motivations for protecting ecological systems include the “regulating” services they provide, such as air and water purification and biodiversity maintenance, and their cultural and aesthetic value (Duraiappah 2004, 13–14). These considerations bring us to the second type of biophysical limit claim, which is about *the finite capacity of an ecological system to withstand perturbations while remaining in its current state*. I call this type of claim a *system limit claim*. It is this second type of claim that is being made by the authors of the Planetary Boundaries studies. System limit claims are less intuitive than resource limit claims, as they invoke abstract concepts from the field of complex systems dynamics.

Both types of claims are integral to sustainability science, and it is important for philosophers who invoke biophysical limit claims to be clear about what is involved in each.

2.3 Philosophical Contestation about Biophysical Limit Claims

Being empirical claims, biophysical limit claims are contestable in ways that are of interest primarily to philosophers of science. Since this paper is ultimately interested in normative work on ecological limits, I will only briefly mention here two types of such contestation, noting their significance for normative work.

First, biophysical limit claims invite ordinary scientific scrutiny among the scientific community. Here, normative theorists should be aware of the (debates about the) role of contextual values in science (Douglas 2009; Elliott 2017). Values necessarily play a role in the science of biophysical limits. For example, values inform the determination of the qualitative state in which it is claimed that a system should be stabilised (i.e. the motivation for positing a system limit). This is clear in the Planetary Boundaries studies, where the authors assume that the relevant Earth systems should be stabilised in “a state conducive

to human development” (Rockström et al. 2009b, 23). Additionally, contextual values enter into the delineation of the system itself, and the assessment of scientific hypotheses about where the relevant thresholds in a system lie—for example, in deciding how much evidence is needed to accept a scientific hypothesis about the location of a threshold, and in deciding how to determine confidence intervals / uncertainty bounds.⁴

Awareness of such contextual values is particularly important when scrutinising scientific claims within the environmental sciences because some of the claims of these sciences are especially contested among scientific experts. This contestation is due to the complexity of many of these sciences and the fact that direct experimental tests of their hypotheses are often out of reach (in principle, or for ethical or practical reasons) (Parker 2017, 27). Philosophers making normative claims in light of scientific claims about biophysical limits should take particular care to consider the values implicated in these claims.

Second, ecological limit claims (when combined with widely-shared normative values) often motivate prescriptions for far-reaching social and political transformation and/or clash with dominant ideologies and worldviews. Accordingly, they are frequently the subject of more overtly politicised—often organised and strategic—contestation that takes place outside (or at the public interface of) established scientific institutions and processes. Consider, for example, the decades long effort financed by fossil fuel corporations to mislead the public about climate science (e.g. Oreskes and Conway 2010; Supran and Oreskes 2017).

How should normative philosophers take account of this second type of contestation, where it is levelled at biophysical limit claims? This, I suggest, depends on whether one is doing ideal or non-ideal theory. Ideal theorists can, according to the tenets of the standard ideal-theoretic method, permissibly abstract from such contestation.⁵ However, the more non-ideal (in the sense of “fact-sensitive”) one’s theorising, the more such contestation becomes relevant to one’s normative theorising. For example, I will suggest in section 3.2, below, that those making

4 See above, footnote 2.

5 The distinction between “abstraction” and “idealisation”, and the kinds of idealisations deemed permissible, have been discussed in O’Neill (1987), Robeyns (2008) and Valentini (2009). This kind of abstraction from facts of social and political life, and ideal theory more generally, is more vigorously contested by realist political theorists: for discussion, see Rossi and Sleat (2014).

proposals for institutional reform or other kinds of real-world action should take seriously the prevalence of strategic contestation, since it affects the epistemic and ideological context in which reform proposals will be entertained by citizens and political elites.

3. Normative Theory and Ecological Limits

Let us now assume the truth of the following two biophysical limit claims: that there are biophysical limits; and that, as the Planetary Boundaries work and its underlying science suggests, many of these limits are close to being or have already been crossed. What follows from these (assumed, yet quite plausible) empirical facts for normative theorising?

3.1 Ecological Limits and Theories of Distributive Justice

Theorising about distributive justice has been a central concern of normative analytical political philosophy since the publication of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971). However, canonical distributive justice theorists in the liberal tradition such as Rawls and Dworkin have been criticised for failing adequately to take seriously the implications of biophysical limits for their theories (e.g. Bell 2017).

More recently, however, theorists of distributive justice have begun to take seriously the idea that an agent's ecological exploitation⁶ requires justification to a far greater extent than has traditionally been assumed in liberal theorising (Armstrong 2017; Bell 2017, 284; Caney 2016; Hayward 2017; Vanderheiden 2009).⁷ Such theorists have focused primarily on the imperative to respect (i.e. avoid breaching) aggregate ecological limits (including the justified determination of such limits) and, within such aggregate limits, the distribution of rights and duties associated with the consumption of natural resources and the conservation of ecological systems (cf. Caney 2020, secs. 2–6; Hayward 2017, 313–14).

6 For interesting conceptualisations of humans' environmental interactions in terms of "ecological space", see Hayward (2017) and Vanderheiden (2009).

7 Two further axes of debate about theories of justice that have been catalysed by, or otherwise explored in the context of, biophysical limits have been the geographic and temporal scope of justice. I cannot explore these voluminous debates here.

Two broad directions in this literature can be observed. The first, and seemingly dominant approach, involves the more or less evolutionary development of dominant theories of justice through the more detailed specification of their implications for human–environment interactions. One recent example is Chris Armstrong’s (2017) theory of justice and natural resources, which works out implications of a cosmopolitan egalitarian theory of justice for questions about both the distribution of limited natural resources and the allocation of burdens and advantages associated with ecosystem conservation. The climate justice literature can also plausibly be seen as an instance of this kind of theorising: there are debates over what justice requires by way of an aggregate limit on anthropogenic net greenhouse gas emissions; and debates over how the resulting “emissions budget” should be distributed (see Caney 2020). The latter debate has been approached, moreover, in the light of more and less “ideal” assumptions regarding, for example, levels of compliance and feasibility constraints (*ibid.*).

The second direction, taken by a smaller group of theorists, has been to introduce novel *theoretical* constructs *into* theories of justice themselves on the purported basis that such innovations better account for facts about biophysical limits. I will here consider two such proposals, which may be called “limitarian” (Robeyns 2017, 2019).⁸

Breana Holland has proposed an innovation to Nussbaum’s capability theory of justice. Nussbaum’s theory posits ten central capabilities, and Nussbaum argues that states should constitutionally protect each person’s right to a minimum threshold level of each capability (Nussbaum 2000, 2006, 287–91, 2011, 33–36). Holland’s argument is as follows:⁹

Because protecting the environmental preconditions of some capabilities can undermine the economic conditions that enable other capabilities,

8 Robeyns (2017, 2019) does not argue for ecological limits *per se*. Rather, she argues for an upper limit on wealth, with one justification for that limit being “unmet urgent needs”—including collective action problems concerning ecological deterioration—that require public financial resources to address. That said, Robeyns includes ecological limits within a broader limitarian theory (personal communication). As to whether limitarianism is best construed as a (partial) theory of justice, a mid-level principle, or a policy proposal, see Timmer (forthcoming).

9 For an interesting discussion of the relationship between this proposal and system-level biophysical limits, see Holland (2014, 159–64).

adequate protection of all capabilities will require establishing *capability ceilings* in addition to capability thresholds. (Holland 2008, 416)

Holland builds on Nussbaum's example of driving (gas-guzzling) SUVs:

to stop people driving SUVs is to limit the ways people can move freely from place to place, which is one component of Nussbaum's bodily integrity capability. Of course, the threshold level of this mobility component may not be so high that it includes being able to move freely from place to place in SUVs, and Nussbaum clearly would not see this extent of mobility as a fundamental entitlement. Yet that is precisely why a capability ceiling is needed. (Ibid 417)

Peeters, Dirix and Sterckx, however, argue that Holland's proposal is redundant, since the existence of the minimum threshold ensures that environmentally-damaging activities that deprive people of their minimum capabilities will not be permitted where those activities themselves go beyond one's minimum entitlements. All relevant parties to the debate agree that driving an SUV goes beyond one's minimum entitlements, so, assuming it threatens others' enjoyment of their minimum entitlements, it would need to be curtailed; the capability ceiling is not needed to generate this result (Peeters, Dirix, and Sterckx 2015, 379).¹⁰

These authors further critique Holland's proposal on the ground that it is "not *having a capability*, but rather *deriving functionings from it*" that relevantly harms the environment (2015, 381, emphasis in original). "In order to prevent illegitimate interference, which would reduce another person's well-being", they suggest, "it might therefore be necessary to constrain people's functionings" (ibid 381). Indeed, they go on to argue that "people's functioning *combinations* should be constrained as a whole—in terms of their aggregate appropriation of environmental assets" (ibid 382, emphasis in original).

However, this proposal, if it is to be understood as an innovation at the level of a *theory* of justice,¹¹ seems to be vulnerable to an equivalent

10 Technically, this result would obtain only if sub-minimum benefits have lexical priority over, or sufficient weighted priority to outweigh, the above-minimum benefits. Where this is not the case, the ceiling may do independent normative work within the theory (and see also the text preceding footnote 14, below).

11 Various passages of the paper suggest that the authors *are* concerned with theories of justice (see, e.g., at pp. 377, 381). This impression is reinforced when the authors

version of these authors' first objection to Holland. If it is truly the universal achievement of the minimum capability thresholds that matters for justice (ibid 381), then the "functioning constraint" seems redundant because the theory will already rule-out above-threshold actions that prevent others' attainment of the minimum threshold.

Still, perhaps the redundancy charge is too quick. For one thing, Nussbaum's capability theory is a *partial* theory of justice, concerned with bringing all persons up to the minimum capability thresholds (Nussbaum 2006, 71, 75, 291–92; 2011, 36); Nussbaum says less about the distributive rule(s) that ought to apply above the minimum threshold (Nussbaum 2006, 71, 75, 292–95; 2011, 40–42).¹² On Nussbaum's theory, claims on social resources to secure *above*-minimum capabilities clearly have a lower priority, but it is not clear how resources should be redistributed away from those who enjoy above-minimum capabilities to those currently below the minimum threshold (e.g. who, among persons who enjoy more than their minimum entitlements, should have to give up their surplus resources first). Upper limits (i.e. *maximum* thresholds¹³) can play a role in determining the redistributive patterns that apply when dealing with resources of agents who are above the minimum threshold (e.g. prioritising redistribution away from those who have resources above the maximum ahead of those whose resources lie in between the minimum and the maximum).¹⁴ This suggests one potential direction in which proposals for capability ceilings or functioning constraints could be developed.

go on to discuss a proposed "operationalisation of functioning constraints" in the form of personal carbon allowances (at p. 382). If functioning constraints require institutional operationalisation, then they are not themselves institutional proposals, and must implicitly be proposed elements of a theory of justice.

- 12 The distributive rule that should apply above the minimum threshold is a subject on which other sufficientarians also disagree: for discussion, see Huseby (2019).
- 13 The conception of a "threshold" in this discussion is intended broadly to mean a discontinuity in the normative reasons that apply on either side of a specific distributive level. Accordingly, there can in theory be "*maximum* thresholds" (i.e. an "upper limit" or "ceiling" is a maximum threshold) as well as the more commonly discussed "*minimum* thresholds" (see further Timmer 2021).
- 14 However, proponents of such multi-threshold views must carefully specify the distributive rules that apply in the three relevant ranges (below the minimum, above the maximum, and in between the two thresholds) and the priority rules that are needed to resolve conflicts between them, such as when respecting the upper limit would leave insufficient resources to raise some persons up to the minimum (Timmer 2021).

An alternative direction—perhaps one closer to these authors’ wider aims—is to conceptualise such upper limits not as novel theoretical elements in theories of justice, but rather as heuristics or tools in non-ideal processes of policy deliberation and design. The idea would be that reasoning about alternative policy options could be enhanced by using capability ceilings or functioning constraints to conceptualise the limiting *effects* on persons of environmental policies that aim to control environmentally damaging behaviour directly (cf. Spengler 2016, 935).¹⁵

It is to proposals that fall squarely in the institutional/legal reform category to which I now turn.

3.2 Ecological Limits and Institutional/Legal Reform

So far, I have considered two possible routes from theories of justice to the conclusion that society should respect limits on ecological exploitation: one route applies existing candidate theories of justice to the assumed facts about biophysical limits; another route adds additional theoretical elements to existing theories of justice. Yet, the theories surveyed tell us little about the *institutional form* that such respect for limits should take. I will now consider two broad categories of proposals involving institutionalised (i.e. legal) ecological limits—aggregate-level limits and individual-level limits. Since it has been an especially active area of philosophical enquiry, I will focus on the example of climate change, i.e. limits on the exploitation of the biosphere’s capacity to absorb greenhouse gases while respecting biophysical limits in the climate system.¹⁶

If we have reasons of justice (or otherwise) to respect certain limits on ecological exploitation, then it follows relatively uncontroversially that such limits should be institutionalised at an appropriate administrative level. At that level, an ecological limit will often be expressed as a goal (or objective or target). Consider, for example, the greenhouse gas mitigation targets that have been legislatively enacted by many national and subnational governments and the EU in order

15 Holland comes close to such a suggestion when she describes institutional legal limits as “an indirect way of establishing capability ceilings” (2008, 417).

16 This way of expressing the limits encompasses both the emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and the erosion of carbon “sinks” (for example, cutting down trees).

to address climate change (Iacobuta et al. 2018).¹⁷ Such targets are often included in “strategic” or “framework” climate laws that also establish governmental processes and institutions to facilitate achieving the targets and determine administrative accountability for doing so (Averchenkova and Nachmany 2017; Averchenkova, Fankhauser and Finnegan 2021).¹⁸ To *actually* achieve a relevant target/goal, however, the relevant government will typically need to take (further) executive action and/or enact (further) legislation to incentivise private actors to change their behaviour. The goal, we might say, needs to be *operationalised* (cf. Vanderheiden 2008).

There is a tendency, in the literature on ecological limits, to assume that, given we have reasons of justice to limit aggregate ecological exploitation (perhaps enshrined in law as an aggregate goal), such limits should be operationalised *via individual (possibly tradeable¹⁹) quotas* on ecological exploitation, be they allocated to group agents such as corporations, natural persons, or both (see especially Hyams 2009; Vanderheiden 2018). However, this assumption is misplaced. Whether individual quotas are the best policy instrument with which to operationalise an aggregate ecological limit in fact depends on a wide range of factors (cf. Spengler 2016, 927, 929, 2018).

Consider two such factors that are pertinent to the choice of policy instrument for addressing environmental problems (including respecting aggregate-level limits). Both considerations militate against the use of individual-level quotas in addressing climate change, but may favour quotas for other environmental problems.

The first such consideration pertains to the *substitutability* of the harmful product or activity.²⁰ Where the prospects for substitution (e.g. through technological innovation) are weak, then there may be

17 There are also internationally-determined limits in the climate realm, as expressed, for example, in the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and, more recently (but in a less precise way), in the Paris Agreement.

18 For further exploration of the normative foundations of climate legislation, see Green (2017).

19 The tradability or otherwise of quotas is an important design feature amenable to philosophical analysis, but is not germane to my arguments below.

20 The issue of substitutability is also central to the “growth” vs “degrowth” debate among environmental scholars (e.g. Hickel and Kallis 2020), which is also relevant to the question of institutional/legal reforms in light of ecological limits.

a stronger case for (tradeable) quotas, since achieving the aggregate goal becomes a matter of legally limiting and distributing access to the relevant resource itself. However, if it is possible to respect an aggregate-level limit by the invention and/or diffusion of substitutes for the environmentally harmful activity/product, then it may be preferable to enact policies that are geared toward the invention and mass diffusion of the substitutes. As leading climate ethicists have noted, a great deal of the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change are produced as a result of activities and technologies that are substitutable (e.g. Caney 2012, 285–91; O’Neill, Holland and Light 2008). This being so, a better justified climate policy might focus on the innovation and diffusion of such substitutes. To replace fossil fuels in energy and industrial uses, for example, an effective combination of policies might include government-funded research and development, subsidies for the demonstration and deployment of new technologies, government provision of necessary infrastructure, and taxes to promote behavioural shifts toward the substitute (Acemoglu et al. 2012; Aghion et al. 2014). A (tradeable) quota scheme would *not* likely provide the best incentives for such results (Aldred 2016; Pearse and Böhm 2014). Yet, tradeable quota systems (a.k.a. “emissions trading” schemes) have dominated debates about climate policy instruments among normative theorists (e.g. Caney and Hepburn 2011; Hyams 2009; Page 2013; Vanderheiden 2018).

The second consideration concerns the *politics of normative ideas*. Philosophers typically evaluate normative policy proposals for environmental problems in a manner that abstracts from the political and ideological context in which their proposals are directed. To be politically relevant, however, the philosophical analysis of public policy must take account of more contextual facts than is typical in ideal theory. As Jonathan Leader Maynard argues, this should include

reflecting on how a certain normative system or prescription will play out in the political thinking of real-world actors—focusing ... [on] the likely forms of reasoning, assumptions and attitudes such arguments and claims might encourage in actual political practice by citizens and elites (Leader Maynard 2017, 307).

With regard to climate change and other complex environmental problems, the ideological context includes strategic attempts by vested interests to: mislead the public about biophysical limits (see Part 2.3, above); frame climate mitigation laws as economic burdens on working families (MacNeil 2016); and frame responsibility for environmental problems as matters of personal consumer choice (Downey 2015, 18–19; Turner 2014). Proponents of quota systems for mitigating climate change in general, and proponents of personal quotas²¹ in particular (Hyams 2009; Vanderheiden 2018), have largely ignored the very real danger that their proposals will play into the hands of such vested interests, potentially making it less likely that aggregate-level ecological limits will be respected.

These considerations raise the question of how “fact-sensitive” the philosophy of public policy should be, especially with respect to political and ideological facts. Certainly, institutional proposals for addressing climate change and other ecological limits vary widely in their stance on this issue. For example, suppose individual emissions quotas really are the “best” policy mechanism for tackling climate change, in some sense that abstracts from relevant political and ideological facts. The implication would then seem to be that we should *change the political conditions* that constrain its implementation. Simon Caney has proposed allocating “second-order responsibilities” to effect such change in relation to climate action (Caney 2014, pts. IV–V).²² However, when it comes to climate change and many other ecological limits, time is of the essence, and Caney’s proposal merely pushes the problems of motivation and collective action “up” one level, to the implementation of such “second-order responsibilities”. Accordingly, Green and Brandstedt (2020) urge theorists to work with *already motivated* agents as part of a more politically “engaged” approach to climate ethics—one that takes political and ideological constraints and opportunities seriously when constructing normative ideas and policy proposals.

21 Under a system of personal carbon quotas, liability is imposed on natural persons for end-use consumption, rather than on corporations upstream in the supply chains of carbon-intensive products.

22 Caney’s (2014) proposal is not explicitly tied to the enactment of an emissions trading scheme, though he elsewhere defends such schemes in a relatively idealised way (Caney and Hepburn 2011).

3.3 Ecological Limits and the Good Life

Nonetheless, it seems clear that any institutional reform proposals sufficiently ambitious to respect biophysical limits, in the climate system and otherwise, will depend upon shifts in the political agency of many individuals and group agents, and hence in their motivating values and beliefs. Indeed, we seem to need to instantiate alternative visions of “the good life” to motivate political action, but also to change the more mundane personal, social and economic habits and practices that threaten ecological limits. This, at least, is an important impetus behind a wide range of work in normative theory that does not fall straightforwardly into theories of justice or specific policy proposals, but which is manifestly concerned, at least in part, with ecological limits and their implications.

For example, numerous scholars have found, in the recognition of ecological limits, the necessity of and inspiration for new environmental *virtues* and *vices* (Jamieson 2007, 2014; Sandler 2007; Sandler and Cafaro 2005; Wensveen 1999; Zwarthoed 2015), *practices* (Schlosberg and Coles 2016), moral-social *norms* (Green 2018), and *ethos* (Butt 2017; Hayward 2009). *Values* such as freedom (Fragnière 2016; Lambacher 2016), autonomy (Vanderheiden 2009) and wellbeing (J. O’Neill 1993), as well as social, economic and institutional *practices of valuing* (J. O’Neill 1993; J. O’Neill, Holland, and Light 2008), have come in for critical reconceptualization in the light of ecological limits. In a similar vein, Melissa Lane (2011) draws on ancient philosophy to challenge contemporary inertia in the face of ecological crises and to provoke new forms of sociopolitical *imagination* and initiative. Indigenous and non-western scholars have drawn attention to the rich resources in indigenous and non-western philosophical traditions for rethinking our value-orientations along more ecologically conscious lines (Whyte 2017; Whyte and Cuomo 2017; Winter 2020). Meanwhile, numerous political theorists have urged a reconceptualisation of fundamental *political institutions* along ecological lines (Dobson 2003; Eckersley 2004; Hayward 2006).

I have barely skimmed the surface of this work, which tackles environmental issues and themes beyond ecological limits *per se* and brings us onto the much wider fields of environmental ethics and

green political theory.²³ Let me conclude this section, then, with two observations. First, as with the work on distributive justice and institutional/legal reform, there is a similar division in ethically-oriented work between more individually-focused ethical constructs, like green virtues, and more structurally and collectively-focused constructs, like social practices and *ethos*. However, individual-level virtue-ethical constructs are not *themselves* framed in terms of limits; rather, they are understood as behavioural dispositions conducive to maintaining aggregate-level limits. This less direct form of individual contribution to respecting aggregate limits may avoid some of the problems raised by individual-level limits discussed in the previous sections.

Second, much of this work focuses on the ethical constructs it would ideally be good to instantiate. By contrast, a smaller but seemingly growing strand of normative theorising engages closely with agents who are already motivated and active in shaping the cultural-ideational context, and thus centres contemporary opportunities and constraints in its approach to the (re)construction of values, norms, virtues, practices etc. (Green and Brandstedt 2020). For example, some theorists are exploiting the many interconnections between ecological themes and other issues that are of concern to already-active cultural and social movements—those grounded in class/labour, racial, indigenous, feminist, anti-colonial and other progressive projects—with a view to forging new ideological and political alignments capable of responding to interlinked challenges (Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003; Bullard 1990; Green 2017; Hathaway 2020; Healy and Barry 2017; Prakash and Girgenti 2020; Schlosberg 2007; Walker 2011; Whyte 2017).

4. Conclusion

As ecological devastation and climate change continue apace, biophysical limits may well be one of the defining themes of the 21st century. It is therefore a welcome development that normative theorists appear to be turning their attention in ever greater numbers to the role of normative limits on ecological exploitation. In this article, I have sought to classify

23 For a more thorough overview of these fields, see, respectively, the *Philosophy Compass* article by McShane (2009), and Gabrielson et al. (2016).

and review ecological limit claims, focusing on descriptive claims about biophysical limits and normative work in which notions of biophysical limits play a central role. The normative discussion distinguished work in distributive justice from work focused on institutional/legal reforms and from a wider literature on values, practices, virtues and other ethical notions concerned with living well within ecological limits. The review sought to highlight some key debates within the literature to give a sense of the promise and pitfalls of theorising about ecological limits. I will conclude with some reflections on promising paths for future scholarship that, to my mind, are suggested from the preceding analysis, focusing on two themes that cut across the various sections in Part 3.

First, throughout the normative analysis, I cautioned against moving too quickly from the acceptance (in light of biophysical limit claims) of normative and institutionalised limits on *aggregate* ecological exploitation to the conclusion that *individual-level* limits on ecological exploitation are justified—whether such individual limits take the form of new theoretical constructs within theories of distributive justice, institutionalised individual quota systems, or new environmental virtues. It is in the space that one traverses when making this move that I see the most pressing need for further (empirically informed) normative scholarship. Three lines of enquiry seem to me most promising in this regard. First, further work on novel theoretical constructs like capability ceilings and functioning constraints would help to elaborate the distinctive function of these constructs, explain their relationship to minimal (e.g. sufficientarian) thresholds, and justify them. Second, individual-level quotas for various forms of ecological exploitation merit further exploration in the philosophy of public policy, with particular care given to justifying/critiquing the move from aggregate limits to individual-level quotas given the potential availability of alternative policy instruments (with different normatively-relevant features), especially those aimed at the innovation and diffusion of substitutes for environmentally harmful activities/products. Third, there would be value in further exploring both individual virtues/vices and (their relationship to) collective social structures aimed at motivating and mobilising individuals to take ecologically sustainable actions.

Second, running through all of these topics is a methodological issue that has resurfaced at various points throughout this review. The issue concerns the degree of sensitivity to facts—particularly political and ideological facts—that normative theorists should take into account when theorising about ecological limits. Given the time-sensitivity of problems involving ecological limits, a shift in the balance of normative theorising toward a greater proportion of fact-sensitive theorising may well be in order. Elegant ideal theories, after all, will be of little use on an uninhabitable earth.

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14. Limitarianism and Future Generations

Tim Meijers

1. Introduction

The idea of too much, of limits, is central to understanding the practically most pressing intergenerational issues. Limitarianism—the idea that it is bad or unjust to have too much—seems like a natural fit. We drive and fly too much. We eat too much meat and dairy. We buy too many things. As a result, we emit too much CO₂ and other greenhouse gases. We—collectively—take up too much ecological space. This chapter asks what the merits and constraints of a limitarian view are in the intergenerational context.

Given the kind of theory that limitarianism is—non-ideal¹ and partial—we should not expect it to provide us with a full-blown theory of intergenerational justice. The goal of this chapter is primarily explorative: it asks what opportunities and challenges limitarianism faces, and sketches the contours of what intergenerational limitarianism could, and should, look like. Given that some of the most pressing challenges we face today have an intergenerational dimension, it makes sense to ask two questions about limitarianism.

First, we might want to ask whether intergenerational concerns bolster the case for limitarianism. Do concerns about intergenerational justice give us additional reasons to embrace limitarianism? Second, we could

¹ But see Herzog (forthcoming), Icardi (in this volume) and Neuhäuser (in this volume) about limitarianism in ideal theory.

ask whether bringing in concerns for future generations can help us develop a limitarianism that fits the most pressing intergenerational challenges with which we are faced. These two questions guide this paper. The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I very briefly introduce the most prominent version of limitarianism, economic limitarianism (Section 2). Next, I argue that the main arguments for limitarianism have considerable intergenerational traction. However, it also raises questions about what principle of allocation limitarians would have to endorse (Section 3). Section 4 argues that if we want limitarianism to cover environmental justice and environmental limits, limitarianism needs to be revised, it cannot just be about money or individual holdings. But these revisions would come at considerable theoretical cost for limitarianism. Perhaps we should not expect this from limitarianism to begin with. The last section before the conclusion, somewhat speculatively, proposes a Rawls-inspired defense of an intergenerational limitarianism.

Introducing Economic Limitarianism

This section offers a brief outline of the key features of economic limitarianism. Limitarianism is the view that it is unjust (or bad) if people are very rich. Nobody should have wealth above a certain line, the limitarian threshold. The key arguments against having too much are twofold. First, large distributive inequalities threaten democratic equality (because money comes with power and can corrupt politics). Second, because the money could do more good elsewhere, i.e., tackling global poverty, disadvantage or collective action problems.

There are several ways to identify the limitarian threshold. First, one may argue that there is something like a riches line, above which more money brings nothing of moral value to those who hold it. In other words, at some point, more wealth does nothing for our objective wellbeing (although we might like to have more). The riches line assumes satiability, a limit to our capacity to convert cash into objective wellbeing. Suppose someone has fortune F of which amount N is above the riches line; taking away amount $N-1$ (dollars, euros, whatever) would not set their interest back in any morally significant way (although they may not like it). One could argue that the limitarian threshold coincides with the riches line: people should not have wealth in excess of the riches line.

One may also defend a limitarian threshold independently of the riches line (and independently of whether one thinks such a line does in fact exist). Such a threshold could be defined in absolute terms, or—given the positional nature of many justice-relevant goods—in relative terms: whether one counts as ‘too rich’ depends on how much others have (see Ben Shahaar 2019; Timmer 2021b).

Economic limitarianism is about *money*, or at least about assets whose value can be expressed in monetary terms. The very rich should give away their surplus wealth, or should have it taxed, or we should move to an economic system in which they will never become so rich. Economic limitarianism is about the holdings of individuals, not the holdings of a state, a generation, or a business. A larger unit of analysis is suggested by Robeyns in her initial formulation of the view, i.e., the family, but even in that case it is the per capita holdings of the family that matter.² It can only be *a person in particular* who has too much. The reason is clear: if we look at average per capita holdings we skip over the fact that different members of the group may hold different amounts. They may on average have too much while individual members may have too little, if the assets are concentrated in the hands of a subset of members.³

Limitarianism, by focusing on the rich, shifts attention from the beneficiaries of redistribution to those who will pay for it. It is contributor focused (for beneficiary-related reasons). Finally, economic limitarianism is a partial and non-ideal theory of justice. We should not expect limitarianism to provide a full theory of distributive justice, but rather it is a part of a larger picture that concerns what we owe to each

2 The family-level analysis comes up in the context of the fertility objection. Robeyns (2017) asks whether, when determining if a family has holdings above the riches line, we should consider whether they have children or not. She argues that we should consider this because some children have morally relevant interests of their own that might be set back by distribution. So, the riches line for a family with four members would lie higher than for a family of two.

3 This is how limitarianism has been formulated so far. Of course, one may be concerned about the wealth concentrated in the ‘hands’ of large corporations, and the limitarian concerns we have about this may not be reduceable to the concerns we have about this wealth being (indirectly) in the hands of the shareholders of this corporation. Similarly, one may be concerned about the wealth of certain states on the global level, allowing for inequalities in both power and affluence in the face of poverty, in ways that are not reduceable to concerns about the holdings of individual citizens of that state: the power of money to corrupt the political process is not tied to it being held by natural persons.

other. It is supposed to be action-guiding, a rallying flag, to move the world in the right direction. Although it does not provide a picture of what a just society would look like, it points to something necessarily absent in any appealing picture of a just society: great abundance in the hands of a few in the face of deprivation. The actions and policies it recommends are not (if the threshold is high) very demanding. The upside is that it does not require consensus on what justice requires exactly. Limitarianism is theoretically light. People holding all sorts of views may agree with the following: if we must reallocate money to advance important universally supported goals, it is preferable to do so at the cost of those who have a tremendous amount of wealth. They will lose nothing, or very little. People holding very different views of justice may agree that imposing a limitarian threshold is a move in the right direction.

Economic Limitarianism and Future Generations

Current discussions about limitarianism have a limited temporal focus. Those defending limitarianism look at the wealth *currently* held by the extremely wealthy, and mostly at *current* social ills that could be addressed through an alternative distribution.⁴ This section explores the intergenerational aspects of economic limitarianism. I focus here on justice between birth cohorts (overlapping or not), not justice between age groups (the old and the young).⁵ Do we have reasons, from the point of view of intergenerational justice, to support economic limitarianism? I will look at the intergenerational implications of the two main arguments of limitarianism separately, because they are arguments of a different nature, they may have divergent implications and different thresholds may result (e.g., Robeyns 2017, p. 36).

Does this question get things the wrong way around? Should we not first ask what the implications of intergenerational limitarianism are?

4 The exception being the ecological argument that Robeyns (2018) develops. Although the argument is clearly relevant to future generations, it is primarily about the fair distributions of the costs of sustainability intragenerationally. Holland (forthcoming) defends a limitarian-adjacent view.

5 Whether limitarianism has a role to play in questions about age-group justice is an interesting question, but not one I will explore here. For some remarks on this issue, see Manuel Sa Valente (2022).

That is how one would proceed with other theories of intergenerational justice. We would not ask whether equality *now* would be good for future people, but whether egalitarian principles apply across generations. Should we not ask whether limitarianism has intergenerational implications, and then test whether those implications meet with some deeply held moral convictions? This kind of objection misses the point. Limitarianism is not meant to be a theory of justice but rather a partial commitment, perhaps best seen as a mid-level principle that we have reasons to embrace in non-ideal circumstances. If we have reasons to be limitarians, we have reasons to do so because of prior moral commitments.⁶ Limitarianism can play a function as a rallying flag, because the central tenets are supported by a wide variety of more substantive moral views. Justice comes first and limitarianism comes second. If one endorses a limitarian principle, one does so for reasons of justice (or other moral considerations): because democratic equality matters, because unmet needs are unjust, and so on. So, do we have reasons relating to intergenerational justice to support economic limitarianism?

The Democratic Argument and Future People

The first argument for limits to wealth focuses on the effects of extreme wealth on democratic equality. Robeyns (2017) drawing on e.g. Christiano (2012), argues that people who are extremely wealthy can (and do) spend large sums of money on influencing the political process at little to no cost to themselves. They can do so by making donations to political parties and lobbying organizations, and attempting to influence voters, and so on. This is a threat to democracy. In a democratic society, citizens should have a roughly equal say (or at least a roughly equal opportunity to have a say). Extreme wealth threatens this. And for liberal theorists democratic equality is of paramount importance and takes priority over economic considerations (e.g., Rawls 1971).

6 For a critique suggesting that this renders limitarianism superfluous, see Huseby (2022), Robeyns (2022), and Timmer (this volume) for a response. Timmer (2021a) proposes other ways to think about limitarianism: as a presumption, a mid-level principle or—more practically—as policy limitarianism.

Limits to wealth would reduce inequalities in power resulting from inequalities in wealth. Depending on whether one embraces the riches line or a relative limitarian threshold, billionaires lose nothing or at least very little in terms of flourishing if we take their surplus wealth away.⁷ Given that limitarianism significantly advances democratic equality at a very low moral cost, this is an easy choice to make. Does the democratic argument have traction in an intergenerational setting? At first sight, democratic equality plays a limited role between us and future people. We do not vote in the same elections and are not straightforwardly members of the same demos. Although we certainly exercise power over future generations, this is because of the unidirectionality of time. The fact that we have power over future generations in ways that they do not have power over us is inevitable.

Political power, and with it, democratic equality, is a positional good. What matters is how much power you can yield in comparison to relevant others. The value of my share of political power depends in part on the amount of political power that others exercise. But it is only in relation to those who yield political power in the same setting that concerns about democratic equality apply. The fact that Julius Caesar held a horrific amount of political power compared to his contemporaries does nothing for my equal standing as a Dutch citizen. One has to share a polity, in some sense, for questions of democratic equality to arise. One may think that what matters from the point of view of democratic equality is that those who live together at a particular time in a particular society yield approximately similar amounts of political power. If this is right, the temporal scope of the democratic argument is limited. Democratic equality at first sight matters synchronically, not diachronically⁸ (at least between non-overlapping generations).

The literature on the democratic argument for limitarianism has said very little about what exactly is bad about democratic inequality. This makes sense, for a non-ideal view: most people agree that democratic equality is of paramount importance. This is enough for a non-ideal theory to garner support. But it is helpful for our purposes

7 It is conceivable that if one embraces a limitarian threshold that is highly responsive to circumstances, the limitarian threshold could be quite low. The result would be that limitarianism *is* quite demanding.

8 At least between non-overlapping generations, see Sa Valente (2022).

here to say a bit more about this question. We can distinguish between instrumental and intrinsic arguments for democracy or the value of democratic equality. First, we may think that democratic inequalities are intrinsically bad: it is wrong if some people have greater opportunities for political influence than others. One may think that democratic legitimacy requires that everybody who is subject to a law should be in some sense a co-author of that law. This is independent of the content of the law decided upon. Even if unequal political influence would have led to a better decision by some objective standard, that decision would be problematic from the point of view of democratic legitimacy. Second, one may think that democratic inequality is bad because it leads to bad or unjust decisions. This is an instrumental concern about democratic inequality: democratic inequalities are bad because—and insofar as—they lead to bad laws and policy. This may be for epistemic reasons (perhaps we missed perspectives of marginalized groups) or for moral reasons (excluding some that skewed the decision, disadvantaging the marginalized). Laws may be less effective, or less just (or both).

The instrumental argument has clear traction in the intergenerational setting: if a democratically equal society makes (morally or epistemically) better decisions regarding future generations, there are instrumental reasons to protect democratic equality. Decisions taken now affect future people. If the rich lobby for deregulation, for example in the domain of fossil fuels, this will adversely impact future generations. In this sense, the existence of extreme wealth *anywhere* at *any time* could be a threat to democratic equality *everywhere* now and in the future, because it gives those with a lot of wealth the opportunity to eschew decision-making in their favour. So, we can conclude the following:

Future consequences of current decisions: Insofar as large inequalities create (an increased risk of) decisions which threaten the rights (or morally significant interests) of future generations, we have intergenerational reasons to support limitarianism.

On instrumental grounds, insofar as democratic inequalities result in bad decisions for future people—or have a larger risk of doing so than alternative distributions—there are reasons to constrain the influence of the very wealthy. Whether the condition holds is an empirical question, but there are some reasons to think that it does. One reason

for thinking that a more equal society would be better for future generations is that egalitarian societies historically tend to be more adaptive in the face of crises.⁹ Another reason (or symptomatic of the previous reason) is that plenty of very wealthy individuals actively oppose the regulation of harmful industries, oppose taxes which would benefit the least advantaged, and actively distort scientific discourse. One may reasonably think we would have done better, and could do better, in the face of the challenges created by climate change without decades of funding for climate denialists and misinformation that has been partially spearheaded by hard-headed opposition from industry.¹⁰ But money can work in several directions, and it is not inconceivable that billionaires would—and some do—put their money behind good causes.¹¹ However, we should not want to be dependent on the goodwill of the rich to spend their money in a particular way.¹² The very fact that they *may* act in tremendously damaging ways, one may think, is enough reason to make sure that they cannot. From the limitarian perspective there is no need to take a gamble if we can make sure instead that wealth is put to good use by taking it away.

What about the intrinsic argument? Future people may nominally live in the same polity as us, but we are not taking decisions together. Future Dutch people live in the Netherlands like me, but we do not make decisions together. Future people do not exist (by definition), so they cannot vote.¹³ The positionality concern does not seem to apply between us and future people.

This does not mean that intrinsic concerns are entirely mute. Even if wealth inequalities between the currently extremely wealthy individuals and future individuals are not a direct concern, extreme wealth *in the future* may be a threat to *future democratic equality*. Rawls argues that intergenerational justice requires that we pass on stable just institutions to future generations (Rawls 1971, section 44). Although

9 See, for example, Van Bavel, Curtis & Soens (2018).

10 There are too many examples to list, from lobbying to misinformation, fake action groups, and so on. One striking example is that “Exxon knew of climate change in 1981, email says—but it funded deniers for 27 more years”, <https://theguardian.com/environment/2015/jul/08/exxon-climate-change-1981-denier-funding>

11 An example of a billionaire who did so is of course Bill Gates.

12 See worries about philanthropy by Reich (2018) for republican arguments of this kind, and Icardi (this volume).

13 One may think that, on all-affected grounds, future people should have a say in current decisions that affect them. For a critical discussion see Heyward (2008).

arguably Rawls's theory of intergenerational justice is not sufficiently demanding (e.g., Gaspart & Gosseries 2007), certainly this is a part of what we owe future people. Passing on just institutions to future generations requires us to pass on institutions in which future people can live as democratic equals. This is the *entrenchment of democratic inequality* argument for limitarianism: inequalities today persist in the future, undermining a future society of equals.

Wealth tends to accumulate intergenerationally. Large fortunes can often be traced far back in time, and rich families are able to hoard opportunities for their own members.¹⁴ Intergenerational accumulation of wealth might deepen and entrench inequalities. But even if there was a way to break the intergenerational chain of dynastic wealth, for example through high inheritance taxation, transferring a society with large inequalities undermines the capacity of future citizens to live as democratic equals. Limiting extreme wealth today, dynastically or by changing an economic system that otherwise enables large inequalities, would limit inequalities of wealth in the future. And given the connection between wealth and political influence, this would undercut future democratic inequality. If we owe future generations democratic equality, we owe it to future generations to transfer to them a society without extreme wealth.

Future synchronic inequalities. It matters that members of future generations can relate to each other as equals within their generation. Insofar as not limiting economic inequalities now entrenches or even increases democratic inequality in the future, we have reasons of intergenerational justice to embrace limitarianism.

On intrinsic grounds, we have reasons to make sure that there is less extreme wealth in the future, because it threatens just democratic institutions in the future. This bolsters the case for limitarianism.

The Argument from Unmet Needs

The second argument for limitarianism is the argument from unmet needs (Robeyns 2017). The argument here does not appeal to inequality but rather to the good that could be done with surplus money. The billionaire loses nothing of significance (or very little if one embraces

¹⁴ E.g., Barone & Mocetti (2021); Clark & Cummins (2015).

a relative threshold) if they lose their surplus wealth. But if it is used well, others have a lot to gain. Surplus wealth could do more good in the hands of those who have the least, because it could address unmet needs, for example basic needs like food, housing and schooling. Again, at first sight this argument is focused on the currently wealthy, and the currently badly off. But one can cash out the unmet needs argument in intergenerational terms. We need to prevent deficits in the future (see, for example, Caney 2010), and for this we need resources. Due to climate change, resource depletion, and so on, future people may find that the meeting of their basic needs is in jeopardy. This can partly be prevented through mitigation and adaptation, but this requires significant investment.

Can we extend the scope of the unmet needs argument to include future generations? One concern is that future basic needs are not the same as current basic needs. Even if we bracket challenges about the moral status of the members of future generations and the resulting difficulties of talking about the needs of and harms to future people, the case of future generations raises difficulties (see Meijers 2018). We can determine with relative certainty whether actions we take now would help someone to meet their basic needs. But the future, especially if we think about the longer term, is uncertain. There is a likelihood that bad outcomes will materialize, and we do not know for whom they will materialize. The fact that we are dealing with probabilities may be a reason to discount the interests of future generations. Future suffering *may* happen, whereas current suffering *does* occur. Meeting unmet needs now may have to take priority over possible, or even likely, unmet needs in the future.

One way forward is to point out that limitarianism does not purport to be a complete theory. Assigning differential weight to several possible destinations for surplus wealth is not a question limitarianism has to answer. We simply have reasons to address *both* types of unmet needs. It is not up to limitarianism as such to say what—if anything—matters more. This can only be part of an answer. Although the interests of current and future generations are very often aligned (rightly emphasized, for example, in the UN Sustainable Development Goals), this is not always the case. First, there may not be enough surplus

wealth to do both, given the magnitude of current and future concerns.¹⁵ Limitarianism, as a view that is focused on where to *get* the money to address injustice, tells us little about how it should be spent. Yet quite a bit is at stake here. The basic needs argument justifies limitarianism on (mostly) forward-looking consequentialist terms: limits bring about a more desirable outcome. This *presupposes* a view about what a better outcome looks like.

Perhaps, pursuing the consequentialist tendency of the argument from unmet needs, we should *maximize* the impact of the way we spend the money. We make sure that more basic needs are met and that more people flourish who are currently not flourishing. Without a discount rate on future people's wellbeing, another classic problem in intergenerational ethics arises. Unless a major disaster arises, there will be many more future people than current people (e.g., Rawls 1971, pp. 286–287). Hence, future-oriented measures may be more efficient than measures aimed at addressing poverty today, simply because we (current people) are outnumbered. Moreover, if 'one takes the size of the population as variable, and postulates a high marginal productivity of capital and a very distant time horizon, maximizing total utility may lead to an excessive rate of accumulation (at least in the near future)' (Rawls 1971, p. 286). The upshot of following the consequentialist logic of imposing limits on a principle of allocation, unless one could justify assigning less moral weight to future people, may very well be that the future is prioritized over the present (see also Lippert-Rasmussen 2012).

Given the concerns at the heart of the limitarian project, it seems unlikely that limitarians would embrace an impersonal form of consequentialism. Such views assign importance to there being more people with positive welfare. They do not just assign value to future people doing well; but also assign value to there being future people (and to the fact that there will be more of them rather than fewer). Limitarians tend to care about making peoples' lives go well, not about having more people with good lives. Whether a limitarian view is resourcist, welfarist, or capabilitarian, limitarianism emphasizes

15 By embracing a limit that is lower or more flexible than the riches line, this challenge may be avoided. For example, if the height of the line was responsive to the amount of unmet basic needs, or if the threshold was relative (e.g., an intragenerational version of the idea suggested by Ben Shahar (2019)).

person-affecting reasons because it takes existing injustices as a starting point.¹⁶

But even if one embraces a person-affecting view which includes the members of future generations, if future people have equal moral weight, the implication that we should prioritize the future follows. We—currently existing people—are outnumbered. This may be a problematic conclusion, although some embrace it. Instead of limitarianism being a rallying sign for people who want to address the worst injustices in the world that exist now, we would end up with a future-focused position that was no longer primarily concerned with the needs of current generations. The upshot of these considerations is that it is hard to tell whether intergenerational limitarianism is an attractive view unless we know the kind of principle of allocation with which it is combined. Saying “limitarianism is only a partial view.¹⁷ Let’s agree about limitarianism first, and talk about how to spend the money later” is not an option. If limitarianism is (partially) justified on consequentialist grounds, we need to know how to distinguish better and worse outcomes in order to decide whether we should be limitarians at all.

There is one more straightforward, contingent way in which limits to wealth could benefit future generations. The super-rich are particularly bad for the environment. Take Taylor Swift, whose private jet was used 170 times between July 2021 and July 2022.¹⁸ Regardless of who was on board (Swift or people she allowed to use her plane), it is quite likely that, although having and operating a private plane is extremely expensive, buying it and using it did not require significant sacrifice. Had she not been extremely wealthy, she would not have been able to afford a private jet. Having fewer extremely wealthy people would be a good way to limit needlessly polluting consumption, creating less unmet needs in the future.

16 Limitarians would probably embrace a consequentialist allocation principle, but it is unlikely to be the kind of allocation principle that is embraced, for example, by long-termist effective-altruists of the utilitarian persuasion (or the policy variant thereof).

17 Robeyns (2022) sees limitarianism as a partial view, a building block for a larger theory of justice. My worry here is that we cannot judge the plausibility of limitarianism without knowing which theory of justice it is a part of.

18 www.guardian.com/music/2022/aug/02/taylor-swift-private-jet-carbon-emissions-blatantly-incorrent.

The rich have the means to behave in ways that harm the planet that people without large amounts of money simply lack, and they can do this at no significant cost to themselves. It is not just that the rich have money to spend on frivolous things; extreme wealth also encourages such acts. Among the rich, there is competition concerning status. Take private yachts, for example.¹⁹ Even if one grants that a yacht could bring something of value, there is a point at which a bigger and fancier yacht does not make owning or using it better. What seems to drive a push for ever larger and more extravagant boats is that the relative size of the boat matters in relation to experiencing the status that comes with having such a boat. But objective wellbeing is not improved when one billionaire out-boats another billionaire, although it may matter tremendously in subjective terms. With less surplus wealth, the competition concerning status is suppressed: it is much more costly to liberate resources to engage in such pointless and wasteful competition.²⁰

If reducing the number of high rollers would reduce the amount of luxury emissions, and this will benefit future generations in morally relevant ways, we'd have an additional reason to support limitarianism.²¹ The environmental impact of limiting wealth may not be insignificant—after all, 10% of the world's population produces 50% of all CO₂ emissions (Oxfam 2020). Whether or not taxing wealth would advance the sustainability goals would depend on what happened to the surplus money next. There is not a perfect correlation between money and emissions, but one may think that at least in our current circumstances the result would be net-positive. This is important to emphasize: this unmet needs argument for limitarianism is much more contingent

19 There is a category of status goods that makes me pause. The very rich may 'buy' status by providing large amounts of funding for goals they consider worthwhile. For example, named donations made to performing arts organizations, or having a building—library, university building, hospital wing—named after oneself. Not all status-driven expenses are frivolous. If the donating billionaire truly loves opera or libraries, there is a way in which her interest is set back in morally relevant ways if she can no longer support worthwhile goals. They advance the objective wellbeing of others with these donations, although not optimally.

20 This problem holds in all social classes, and affects all sorts of status goods. I think it should be uncontroversial that most status goods that billionaires spend their wealth on do not advance their objective wellbeing, but it is more difficult to determine this for those who are not extremely wealthy. See e.g., Axelsen and Nielsen (2022, p. 744).

21 See also Koch & Buch-Hansen (2020).

than the democratic counterpart. In a world where, for example, the billionaire class invested in nature reserves or the development of green technology, the calculus might have a different result.

This gives us an additional reason to think about a principle of allocation. Surplus money may do more harm to future people than good if allocated in the wrong way, even if it does contribute to the lives of those currently badly off. Limitarianism tells us where to take money and which general direction to send it in. But it does not, as such, specify how trade-offs in the allocation need to be dealt with. In a carbon-heavy economy, allowing more people to consume might increase emissions, pollution, and depletion. The interests of the currently badly off and future generations may not be completely aligned and may even significantly diverge. The intergenerational case shows, in a particularly stark manner, that for limitarianism to be plausible it needs a view about what happens at the bottom, not just about what happens at the top.

To know whether taxing the wealthy does indeed lead to better outcomes for future people, we need to know two things. First, we need to know what the rich do with their money and what the recipients will do with it. If (unrealistically) all billionaires become green fanatics and promote sustainability and poorer recipients start eating meat, burning more coal or buying cars, we do not have intergenerational reasons to embrace limitarianism (even if it would in fact make the life of the worst-off better). Second, we need to know how to weigh different possible destinations of surplus wealth. This is theoretically more pressing.

Allocation objection: we cannot judge the implications of the argument from unmet needs in the intergenerational sphere without a principle of allocation.

One of the reasons limitarianism is appealing is that it is theoretically light. It has a relatively thin set of substantive commitments. If limitarianism cannot do without an allocation principle, a view of what makes an alternative distribution *better* and when it is better, it needs stronger and possibly more controversial commitments, which could make it lose some of its ecumenical potential. Note that this concern applies only to the argument from basic needs. The argument from democratic equality is not affected.

How could limitarians respond to the allocation objection? When confronted with more destinations for surplus wealth than available

surplus wealth, limitarians have two options. First, they could propose a rule of allocation under scarcity. This would require a stance on which type of concerns get priority. For example, uncertainty about the future should factor in when we weigh how much we owe to future generations. Or perhaps our duties to our contemporaries are more demanding because we have stronger associative duties to them, or for epistemic reasons we are better placed to help them. Or perhaps we owe future generations *less* due to a morally relevant difference between our contemporaries and future people.

Second, one could propose lower, more flexible wealth thresholds.²² One may think that given the pressing circumstances we find ourselves in environmentally speaking, we should take much more from the rich than just their surplus wealth. With more to distribute, tensions are less likely to become unsurmountable. In her discussion of the ecological argument, Robeyns (2018) justifies taking surplus wealth for climate purposes quite extensively. Whereas the argument from unmet needs appeals solely to the consequences of distribution, Robeyns defends limits on these grounds partially for backward-looking reasons. She argues that because the rich are responsible for emissions and because they benefit the most from emissions, they have an additional *special* responsibility. It is fair that they take on the largest share of environmental duties, which partially encapsulate our duties to future generations.

This argument lays the foundations for another response: perhaps we should embrace the idea that we have good reasons to let those who pollute too much pay for the environmental transition, *even* if it pushes them below the riches line. Chris Neuhäuser points to this idea in the context of climate change when he says: “Those who within rich countries count as simply well-to-do, clearly turn out to be rich in morally problematic ways in the global context.” (Neuhäuser 2018, p. 187, my translation).

The latter answer comes at some cost for limitarianism. It no longer appeals to surplus wealth alone. Principles of responsibility and fairness

22 Icardi (this volume) also makes this point: if limitarianism appeals to the fact that the interests of those with unmet needs simply outweigh the interests of the very wealthy in holding on to their wealth, the distinctive nature of the view comes under pressure.

would have to do much of the work. Or, if wealth acts as a proxy for responsibility, limitarians would have to embrace a rather low threshold and limitarianism wouldn't be a view about what most people would consider the rich. Earlier I mentioned that the richest 10% of the world emits 50% of emissions, but of course many members of the middle class in richer countries belong to the richest 10%. This strategy does not rule out tragic, interpersonal trade-offs. As the climate crisis becomes more severe, this may increasingly be the case.

Beyond Economic Limitarianism?

Economic limitarianism primarily discusses current social ills. And although environmental issues and climate change are mentioned as possible destinations of surplus money,²³ concerns about future generations are not the starting point. Although economic limitarianism has intergenerational potential, it faces challenges when trying to capture central concerns of intergenerational justice.

The first reason for this is the emphasis on money. Money is not irrelevant when it comes to intergenerational transfers, but it is not the only—or most important—thing. It matters that we transfer enough financial resources to future generations and that we do not leave them, for example, with enormous [foreign] sovereign debt. But a solid financial position cannot compensate for extreme weather, failed harvests, depleted resources, and so on. This is the *ecological sustainability objection*. As Robeyns puts it:

Yet for ecological reasons surely it matters a great deal whether people use their [wealth] to attend yoga classes, buy an SUV, or fly on a regular basis. [My] account of riches doesn't tell us anything about people's ecological footprint. Isn't that a relevant moral consideration when we decide who counts as rich and who doesn't? (Robeyns 2017, p. 28)

Robeyns's reply to this concern is that ecological resources are an analytically distinct issue. We should think of ecological constraints as

23 The concern is mostly about sharing the burden that comes with acting in relation to our environmental duties in a fair way, making the broadest shoulders as well as the polluters (in the real world often the same people, e.g., Shue 2005) carry the burdens.

additional limits: there may be limits to ecological impact, emissions, and so on, as well as to wealth. Yet in the case of intergenerational justice, the basic needs of future generations cannot be seen separately from ecological limits. If future basic needs give rise to economic limitarianism, they give rise to ecological limitarianism as well. They are entangled and the ecological limits are more fundamental. It is conceivable to have very wealthy individuals who sit well above the flourishing line, but if they invest their money in solar panels, gardens for bees, and the development of sustainable technology, extreme wealth is not a concern from the point of view of intergenerational justice. And people well below the riches line may be a serious threat if they spend their limited resources in the wrong way. Money-only limitarianism would be isolationist (focus on only one thing among others that matter) and seems unable to capture those things that matter most from an intergenerational perspective.

I have already pointed to the fact the redistribution in a carbon-reliant economy could lead to increased overall emissions, creating a possible clash between the interests of current and future people. If the scope of the basic needs argument is intergenerational, the link between ecological and financial limits is stronger than it seems at first sight. We could divert surplus money to solving large collective action problems with clear relevance for future generations, converting cash into sustainability. But this cannot be the full story. It may very well be that, even without too much money, people will emit too much, consume too much, and pollute too much. And sharing the burden of collective action problems fairly is an intragenerational issue even though it concerns investments which will benefit, among others, future generations (e.g., Robeyns 2017).

Limitarians will share these concerns. Concerns about needs, wellbeing, and the capacity to lead a good life are central to the argument from basic needs. Money is simply a proxy. And we should only rely on a proxy if the proxy is reliable. In the intergenerational setting, money is not the right way to measure—not the right metric—what we really care about from the point of view of justice. The first move for a more complete picture of intergenerational limits would be to move away from this proxy and to focus on ecological limits. If we follow the template of money limitarianism, we need to ask whether

there is something like surplus emissions, surplus pollution, and so on, understood as emissions and pollution which have little to no value to the polluters or the emitters. This line may be harder to draw than in the case of money. If I can get to work by bike or by car and both options are equally good, it is clear that my interest is not significantly set back by not using the car. But it is not true that driving the car to work would have no value to me. This suggests another kind of threshold: we should not ask whether the extra emission or pollution leads to an improvement in terms of additional wellbeing, but whether the pollution or emission is necessary for an improvement in terms of objective wellbeing.²⁴ Perhaps we do not need a threshold as stringent as this. Breena Holland, who defends capability ceilings, proposes a different, softer kind of threshold which results from weighing interests. She writes that “limiting activities that are of low importance and high per capacity emissions would do the most to maximize the freedom of both present and future people” (Holland forthcoming, p. 15). The limit would, in this case, become something more flexible aimed at balancing the interests of future and current people.

An ecological limitarianism would provide a part of the solution to the allocation problem faced by economic limitarianism. It would allow us to order priorities when deciding where to allocate surplus money so as to take the environmental impact of wealth into account directly. Concerns about basic needs go beyond money. For limitarianism to play a central role in theorizing intergenerational justice, it would have to embrace the ‘Not just money’ claim: intergenerational limitarianism cannot be just, or even primarily, about money.

The second reason why economic limitarianism falls short as a view on intergenerational justice is its focus on individual limits.²⁵ But from the point of view of sustainability, this is not the only thing that matters; we need to think about whether humanity as a whole acts sustainably. This suggests the idea that collective rather than individual limits are what matter. We may still violate collective limits even if nobody in particular is engaged in surplus emissions, pollution, or consumption.

24 See E.g., Shue (1993) on luxury and subsistence emissions.

25 See also Hickey (2021) for an elaborate discussion of lower individual limits derived from planetary limits and Green (2021) for the different roles ecological thresholds play.

Collective limits may be much lower than the aggregation of individual limits, understood as consumption that does not contribute significantly to objective wellbeing.²⁶ This, again, points to the need for a more demanding version of limitarianism which places collective thresholds over individual ones. One would have to embrace the idea that collective limits are prior to individual limits: collective limits take precedence and determine the limits within which individual limits have to be set.

What about situations in which there is enough for everybody without exceeding the collective limit? At that point, is there no longer a role for generational limits? One may think that as soon as we pass on enough to future people, current people can do whatever they want with the surplus. This is what the principle of sufficiency, in its traditional or conservative interpretation, allows. We are permitted to use more than enough providing we are not depriving any other present or future individual of enough, even if our doing so upsets intra- or intergenerational equality. On this view, while equality may have force when so many lack enough, once all have enough there is no justification for insisting on an egalitarian distribution. Paula Casal has proposed a different interpretation of sufficiency, which she terms Conservationist Sufficiency. On this interpretation, universal sufficiency does not undermine the case for equality, but instead undermines the case for further environmental destruction. Once we have enough, we may continue to use resources harmlessly or sustainably but have, perhaps defeasible, but still very powerful reasons not to cause further environmental destruction, at least until sufficient conservation has been secured.²⁷ One reason for this is that the future is very uncertain, and if avoiding insufficiency is very important, avoiding the risk of insufficiency is very important too. On a reasonable interpretation of the precautionary principle, a limit is required even in circumstances

26 This suggests another kind of limit: if both the total and the per capita matter, should we think about limits to population, too? Part of the historical precedent of some form of limitarianism is the work of Thomas Malthus, who links the idea of having (collectively) too many children with individuals falling below the sufficiency threshold. One does not have to be a Malthusian to endorse the idea that some demographic developments are problematic from the point of view of justice, even if one should be hesitant to talk about 'surplus' people for obvious reasons. For a discussion on limits to demographic growth, see Meijers (2017).

27 Minimizing risks of future insufficiency is one of the many reasons for 'Conservationist sufficiency' given by Casal (draft).

of relative abundance. If using more ecological resources does not significantly improve the position of the current generations (except perhaps by allowing them to engage in frivolous preferences), it is better to transfer a planet with a larger rather than a smaller carrying capacity. We do not know what kind of circumstances future people will be confronted with, and if our lives are already good enough, perhaps we lack the permission to use more in ways that do not benefit future generations. This version of sufficiency and some version of limitarianism that stresses the need to reduce consumption, may have similar implications.

A version of intergenerational limitarianism—collective limits, focused on natural resources and carrying capacity, embracing a precautionary principle—may offer an appealing view of our intergenerational duties. But it strays considerably from economic limitarianism. It may no longer be recognizable as a version of it. It is much more demanding and requires a much larger degree of theoretical and political agreement. It will resemble a view of (intergenerational) fair distributive shares more generally. But we already have such views (in which limits play a significant role). This raises questions about the purpose of a view like limitarianism: a move to include ecological concerns (not just money, collective limits) may come at the cost of the distinct role of limitarianism to the literature on distributive justice.

Limits and Constraints on Intergenerational Transfers?

So far, the focus has been on limits on the current generation: how much they can own and how much they can use. But limits could play another role, too: limits on how much we should transfer to future generations. From an egalitarian perspective, Gaspart and Gosseries (2007) argue that Rawlsian egalitarians should consider generational savings (transferring more than is received) unfair. This is because the savings could also be used to benefit the least well-off within a particular generation. On this view, equality would be the intergenerational limit due to the maximum allocation rule.

Rawls's view on intergenerational justice is usually interpreted as an institutional form of sufficientarianism, but some of the arguments offered have limitarian potential. Rawls (1971, §44) embraces the just

savings principle, which entails that our duties to future people are satiable: at some point we have done enough. This point occurs when just institutions persist stably over time (and, plausibly, their natural preconditions) (Meijers 2017). We have to save, and transfer more than we have received, until we are at that point. After that, the duty to save disappears. Rawls writes about this steady state, saying that “the last stage at which saving is called for is not one of great abundance” and that “it is a mistake to believe that a just and good society must wait upon a high material standard of life” (Rawls 1971, p. 290). What this emphasizes is that duties to future generations are capped (unlike, for Rawls, duties of justice among contemporaries). The level of the cap is not particularly high: we do not owe future generations extremely high standards of life. No great abundance, no high material standard of life. So far, so sufficientarian. There are duties up to a certain level, but no duties above it. Rawls goes on to express a limitarian position next, though:

What men want is meaningful work in free association with others, these associations regulate relations to one another within a framework of just basic institutions. To achieve this state of things great wealth is not necessary. In fact, beyond some point it is more likely to be a positive hindrance, a meaningless distraction at best if not a temptation to indulgence and emptiness (Rawls 1971, p. 290).

There are two claims here. First, what makes life go well does not come from ‘great wealth’ but from self-realization (it is no coincidence that this sentiment returns in the discussion of the Aristotelian Principle: see Rawls 1971, §65). The second claim goes beyond this: not only do we not need great wealth, but it is also an obstacle. Nothing is gained by engaging in greater material consumption; on the contrary, great wealth might be a hindrance.

This second claim has a limitarian ring: there is a point at which more wealth has no additional value. But it is limitarianism of a radical kind. Wealth may be *bad for* those who have it. And this may be true not only for the very rich; it is conceivable that many have *too much*. This passage is not easily dismissed as an anomaly in Rawls. Over thirty years later, he expressed a very similar sentiment in a letter to Philippe van Parijs, talking about the EU:

The large open market including all of Europe is the aim of the large banks and the capitalist business class whose main goal is simply larger profit. The idea of economic growth, onwards and upwards, with no specific end in sight, fits this class perfectly. If they speak about distribution, it is [al]most always in terms of trickle down. The long-term result of this—which we already have in the United States—is a civil society awash in a meaningless consumerism of some kind. I can't believe that that is what you want (Rawls & Van Parijs 2003).

This is perhaps the most striking anti-capitalist anti-growth statement from Rawls we have on public record, but it is consistent with his position from *A Theory of Justice* up to his last writings. We're not interested here in Rawls's 'true' position; the question is whether such a limitarianism makes sense and, if it does, what it implies.²⁸ This second quote helps us make sense of the previous one. Why would more *wealth* be bad? This becomes clearer if we do not understand more wealth in terms of a better life. It is about economic growth and what is done with the resulting money: engaging in *meaningless consumerism* or spending it on a very high *material* standard of life. Growth 'onwards and upwards' is bad if it is growth in terms of wealth understood as material wealth. What I take to be Rawls's limitarian claim here is that it is wrong to transfer the kind of society in which consumption and growth are treated as central to the good life, *even* if these high consumptive standards can be met. It is about the kind of society that we leave behind, and it being conducive to future people being able to lead good lives and not inheriting a society obsessed with GDP growth or consumption.

At first sight, this appeal to the more perfectionist, Aristotelian, elements in Rawls's work brings to mind perfectionist, or 'intrinsic', forms of limitarianism, for example as developed by Danielle Zwarthoed, although at a societal level and possibly with a lower threshold.²⁹ I want to suggest—I admit somewhat tentatively here—that there are not impermissibly perfectionist reasons to embrace a position like this. Importantly, the limitarianism that Rawls's quote suggests is one of economic growth and levels of consumption, not of all kinds of transfers. Transferring more knowledge, more ways to cure diseases,

28 See Gaspart & Gosseries (2007), Attas (2009), and Meijers (2017) for close readings of Rawls.

29 Zwarthoed (2018), as well as Aristotle, as discussed by Kramm and Robeyns (2020).

more natural beauty, or biodiversity or a more resilient climate are clearly not ruled out: we may give future generations *more* in this sense. The concern about ‘meaningless consumerism’ does not apply to these kinds of concerns. It does not forbid increasing or enriching the valuable opportunities of future people.³⁰

Transferring a society obsessed with growth and consumption could be thought to be wrong for two reasons. First, the capacity to formulate, revise and pursue reasonable and rational plans in life is crucial for liberal theories. A liberal theory of justice does not tell us what our plan should be, but protects our capacity to formulate and pursue the plan that we ourselves reflectively endorse. This entails having responsibility for our ends: we have the responsibility to formulate plans which fit our fair share. It would be unreasonable, even if the plan itself were not irrational, to pursue a plan which would require others to sacrifice their plans for mine. If there are planetary ecological limits, we have reasons to adjust our plans in life to these limits. Transferring a set of values to future people which emphasizes consumption and economic growth while this is incompatible with the limits of justice places future generations in a difficult spot. We are basically transferring irrational values to future people, if these values inform plans in life that cannot be realized with one’s intergenerational fair share. Although future generations might be able to come to terms with the limits, it will come at a considerable cost—having to revise their plans—to them. Although the concern here is about living within one’s fair share, it aligns our plans with planetary limits, as discussed in the previous section. This is clearly a non-perfectionist reason, but the reasons for it are contingent.

Second, note the reference to indulgence, emptiness, and a lifestyle “awash in meaninglessness” in Rawls. This suggests a second wrong: transferring a society which imprints meaningless plans on to its members, and harms our (and future peoples’) capacity to lead meaningful lives. This is a deeper concern, and, if legitimate, would hold

30 Rawls thinks many of the most important things in life are not primarily fueled by consumption. In the context of the rationality of conceptions of the good and the Aristotelian principle he writes: “thus the familiar values of personal affection and friendship, meaningful work and social cooperation, the pursuit of knowledge and the fashioning and contemplation of beautiful objects, are not only prominent in our rational plans but they can for the most part be advanced in a manner which justice permits.” (Rawls 1971, p. 425).

even if consumerism were not likely to lead to intergenerational wrongs. Even if, through a technological miracle, we were able to lift the entire global population to current levels of consumption and beyond, there are reasons to hesitate. This sounds perfectionist: the good life consists of meaningful activities, not of empty consumption. But at the very least it is not *more* perfectionist than keeping current views in place, which emphasize material consumption. Such a society also leaves very little room for other plans in life: even if one chose it, all the alternatives come at considerable costs. If such a culture does indeed hinder people who are attempting to pursue rational plans in life, for example because they will be engaged in endless competition for status with other citizen-consumers instead of pursuing an actual conception of the good, we can say a bit more: moving away from a culture which makes rather meaningless activities central (and the default) does not hinder people's capacity to lead meaningful lives. If they decide that the materialist life is the life for them after all, they should be allowed to pursue it within the bounds of justice (just as the grass-counter can count grass (Rawls 1971, p. 432) however pointless). But it should not be the norm.

One way to think about what we owe to future generations in this context is in terms of the kinds of plans in life our societies set as a default. De-emphasize the consumptive resource-intensive activities and emphasize others. One upshot of this is that the kinds of limits discussed in Section 4 will not *feel* like impossible limits to meet, or less so. To someone who conceives of the good life as one of consumption, living within the limits of intergenerational justice is hard, almost impossible. We could aim to internalize the limits that intergenerational justice requires us to respect, formulate plans in life, and pursue them, in an ecologically light fashion. This does not need to be a worse life (see footnote 31). If consumerism is indeed a meaningless distraction, it may even be better. It does not need to be a monkish life that is devoid of pleasure. Rejecting ever-increasing consumption does not entail the rejection of growth in terms of flourishing or wellbeing.

In the section about economic limitarianism I have discussed the entrenchment of democratic inequality. But these are not the only things which are passed down intergenerationally as a result of extreme wealth. Money *today* influences and shapes the kind of ideas and ideologies that persist through time. This may be done by wealthy individuals funding think-tanks, or by large corporations or industries. An example would be

the success of the automotive industry in making their product central to our ways of life, often at the detriment of public transport, livable cities, and the environment. Large fortunes with strong stakes in the continuation of our current way of life may, and do, put their fortunes behind maintaining our focus on consumption. Wealth now may sustain ideas, norms and values that are harmful to future people, as Rawls too suggests in his letter to Van Parijs about large banks and the capitalist business class pushing for a certain view of what Europe should be. The kinds of limit we can read into Rawls's view on intergenerational justice tie up with concerns about democratic equality; we should be concerned about how current wealth—held by individuals, but also by corporations—shape not just the present but also the future. And this is not just a consequentialist concern, since one may also be concerned about the fact that the rich have such a disproportionate amount of influence over what the future of our societies and planet look like.³¹

Although a limit of this kind focuses on changing the way people formulate their plans in life, it is primarily about societal change. It is not just about the individual not using more than their fair share, but about creating the kind of society in which people freely formulate less resource-intensive plans in life. This involves more than changing individual behaviour; it also involves changing how we treat each other, how we organize ourselves politically and socially, how we design our physical environment, and so on. It would help to reconcile us—as well as future generations—to the limits with which we are faced. It may improve our capacity to lead meaningful lives. Perhaps we owe future generations a society which limits growth.³²

The limitarianism suggested here ties different concerns raised in this paper together, and has something to say about the currently rich, environmental limits and what kind of society we should leave behind. It strays considerably from limitarianism as originally formulated, and is considerably more demanding and theoretically less light. The ideal may be appealing, but whether we should present it under the heading

31 I thank Paula Casal for insisting on this point. I cannot do full justice to her suggestion here, much more needs to be said about the ability of current wealth to shape the future materially and ideologically.

32 Much more needs to be said about the kind of limitarianism hinted at here: whether it is indeed a *liberal* theory, whether it stands as a theory of Rawls, and how it relates to adjacent fields like de-growth economics and rethinking of the terms of prosperity, etc.

of limitarianism depends on what limitarianism is supposed to be about. The ideal presented here, however, does stay true to one of the core limitarian ideas, emphasizing the idea of too much wealth.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the prospects of limitarianism in debates about intergenerational justice. Bringing in the intergenerational perspective bolsters the case for limitarianism, but it also raises significant challenges. The democratic argument has considerable traction intergenerationally: if we owe future generations democratic institutions, we cannot transfer a society to them that is very unequal. The argument from unmet needs, too, has intergenerational traction. But it points to an important issue going forward: questions about allocation. We cannot really come to terms with the implications of limitarianism if we do not know what happens to surplus wealth: whose hands it ends up in, what they do with it, and what good it would have done elsewhere.

Although economic limitarianism has traction in the intergenerational domain, it seems ill-equipped to tackle crucial questions concerning intergenerational justice. Due to its focus on money and on individual limits, it seems unable to arrive at a minimally plausible view of intergenerational justice. Tailoring limitarianism to fit the demands of intergenerational justice would result in a more demanding and theoretically more controversial view. Moreover, that view would likely move in the direction of existing theories of distributive justice. An important question is what conclusion one should draw for limitarianism from this. Perhaps the upshot is that limitarianism as a political ideal is suitable to tackle a limited set of questions, related to extreme economic wealth, only. Going beyond this, I have suggested somewhat speculatively a Rawlsian view of intergenerational limitarianism. Such a view—about which more needs to be said—goes some way to bringing environmental considerations in under the heading of a form of economic limitarianism, reconciling reasonable limits on our environmental impact with the threat this poses to our ability to pursue our plans in life.

The concerns I have voiced about limitarianism have an overarching theme. Limitarianism is—in part—appealing because it is theoretically,

morally and politically light, due to its focus on those who have the most and its appeals to social wrongs which are generally uncontroversial. Very few people are, at least openly, opposed to meeting basic needs or protecting democratic equality and it is not particularly demanding. It is a view which would in principle be able to garner broad support. But principles of (intergenerational) allocation or settling on limits to protect the needs of future people come with heavier theoretical commitments, damaging the broad support for the view. This is a broader concern, reflected in the current debate about limitarianism. A more ambitious limitarianism—lower wealth thresholds, or relative thresholds, as many propose—may be better able to capture grave injustices but risks losing broad support as well as morphing limitarianism into existing distributive views. One of limitarianism’s biggest challenges is to navigate the path between the ability to cover the worst cases of injustice and the ability to remain sufficiently light to maintain ecumenical social and theoretical appeal.

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Index

- al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid 63
Anderson, Elizabeth 280
Aquinas, Thomas 20, 62, 74–76, 79–80,
82–85, 151
Aristotle 20, 62, 64–68, 71–76, 78–79,
82–85, 151, 162, 381–383
De anima 66
Nicomachean Ethics 67, 71
Politics 66, 71
Armstrong, Chris 343
Arneson, Richard 16, 143
Attas, Daniel 382
authority 1, 289, 306–307, 309, 322. *See*
also power
autonomy 5, 8, 41, 92–124, 134, 152,
161–162, 165–166, 168, 182–183, 197,
236, 242, 326, 350
Axelsen, David 133, 173, 177, 199, 223,
238, 242, 373, 387

Baatz, Christian 298, 325–327
Bangladesh 318
Barry, Brian 228
Benbaji, Yitzak 227
Ben-Shahar, Harel 259, 261
Berry, Christopher 81
billionaires 2, 35, 38, 178, 207, 211–212,
226, 241, 366, 368–369, 373–374
Bird, Colin 276
Bourdieu, Pierre 106
Broome, John 27, 45
Buffett, Warren 99

Caney, Simon 349
capabilities 15, 38, 40–44, 85, 115, 140,
151, 153, 159, 163–164, 196, 261, 313,
321, 328, 343–345
capability approach 35–36, 38, 41, 113
capitalism 3, 69–70, 72–73, 75–76, 84,
382, 385
Carter, Ian 284
Casal, Paula 29, 195, 221–222, 379, 385,
387
Central African Republic 318
Chad 318
Christiano, Thomas 21–22, 154, 156,
234, 253, 365
climate change 12, 26, 132, 134, 137,
176, 183, 210, 223, 229, 243, 297–299,
305, 309–310, 317, 321–322, 328–330,
338–339, 346–349, 351, 368, 370,
375–376
climate crisis 61, 86, 335, 376
Club of Rome 337
The Limits to Growth 337–338
Cohen, Gerald 280
communism 69, 84, 301
consumerism 108, 382–384
consumption 3, 12, 35, 39, 77, 80, 82–83,
103, 106, 108, 120, 177, 235, 240, 342,
349, 372, 378–385
corruption 24, 26, 178, 362–363
Couch, Ethan 91–92
Covid-19 pandemic 243
Cripps, Elizabeth 298
Crisp, Roger 221, 231–232

- Crouch, Colin 111
- De Dijn, Annelien 65
- de-growth economics 347, 385
- democracy 6–10, 12, 20–25, 41–42, 47, 52–53, 55–56, 63, 67, 83–84, 92–93, 97, 112, 130, 132, 134, 143–144, 154–156, 176–177, 182, 184–186, 189, 197, 234–235, 247–249, 252, 255–259, 262, 264–267, 271–272, 279, 288, 291, 293, 362, 365–369, 374, 384–387
- difference principle 6, 15, 51–52, 54, 119–120, 272–274, 277–278, 280–281, 283, 285, 288–291
- Dirix, Jo 344
- Disney, Walt 113
- Dumitru, Adelin Costin 2, 6, 8, 87, 129, 193, 247, 249, 256–260, 262–264, 267
- Dworkin, Gerald 105
- Dworkin, Ronald 85
- Earth's Absorptive Capacity (EAC) 298–300, 305–306, 309–319, 321–322, 325, 327–330
- egalitarianism 4–5, 18–19, 58, 86, 115, 119, 121, 133, 136–137, 139–140, 142, 145, 152, 156–158, 160, 163, 166, 168–172, 175, 177, 180, 184–191, 195, 197–199, 204, 207–211, 214–217, 222–224, 227, 231–232, 235, 239, 261, 274, 291, 297, 301, 343, 365, 368, 379–380
- energy 1, 299, 311, 313, 348
- Engels, Friedrich 62, 71–73, 75, 84, 87
Manifesto of the Communist Party 72
- England 31
- Epictetus 76
- equality 6–8, 15, 18, 20, 22–25, 47, 50–54, 62–63, 70, 81, 83, 85–86, 92, 114–115, 119, 130, 132, 134, 138–141, 143–146, 153–159, 161–162, 166, 171, 184–188, 194, 196–197, 209–210, 212, 214–215, 223–224, 232, 234–235, 239, 243, 248, 251, 255–256, 258–259, 264, 271–272, 275–281, 283–291, 300–301, 305–306, 309, 314, 316, 321–322, 362, 365–369, 374, 379–380, 385, 387
- Europe 2, 17, 30, 33, 42–43, 382, 385
- European Union 12, 30, 39, 87, 147, 199, 244, 330, 346, 353, 381
- fertility objection 45–46, 363
- Festinger, Leon 108
- flourishing 6–8, 10, 15, 19, 21, 25, 27–29, 34, 38, 40, 43–44, 68, 71–72, 75–77, 104, 130, 134, 153–154, 156–161, 164, 167, 177–178, 181–183, 186, 191–193, 195, 197, 207, 209, 212, 230, 234, 242–243, 249, 255–264, 267, 271, 366, 371, 377, 384
- food 1, 21, 30, 65, 68, 77, 79, 82, 111, 160, 311, 313, 338, 370
- fossil fuels 2, 229, 299, 321, 336, 341, 348, 367
- France 115
- Frankfurt, Harry 222–223
- Frank, Robert 103
- Freeman, Samuel 283
- Frey, Bruno 98, 103
- Fricker, Miranda 112
- Gaspard, Frédéric 369, 380, 382
- Gates, Bill 368
- Germany 3, 306
- Gosseries, Axel 124, 190, 369, 380, 382
- Gough, Ian 240
- Green, Fergus 6, 147, 244, 335, 347, 349, 378
- greenhouse gases 2, 18, 23, 297, 299, 311, 314–315, 317, 325, 330, 346, 361
- Griffin, James 307
- Grouchy, Sophie de 63
- Harrington, James 65
- Herzog, Lisa 4, 9
- Heyward, Clare 173, 368
- Hickey, Colin 5–6, 12, 87, 147, 199, 217, 219, 235, 297, 353, 378, 387
- Hill, Tom 306
- Hirsch, Fred 287
- Hobbes, Thomas 301, 304, 322
- Hobhouse, L. T. 4
- Holland, Breena 18, 42, 343–346, 364, 378
- Hope, Simon 228

- housing 1, 30, 111, 214, 370
- Hume, David 98, 228–229
- Huseby, Robert 5, 7, 151, 175–176, 180, 183–190, 197, 199, 203–205, 207–209, 211–212, 214–217, 225, 227, 232, 238–239, 242, 345, 365
- Icardi, Elena 6, 8, 12, 199, 217, 247, 258, 272, 361, 368, 375, 387
- income 1–2, 12, 16–17, 20, 25–28, 30–33, 35–40, 42, 45–46, 48, 51–53, 55, 64, 84, 93, 97–98, 102–104, 108–110, 114–116, 122, 131, 135–136, 142, 147, 153–155, 175–177, 186, 195–196, 277, 280, 287, 289–290, 292, 299, 307
- India 26, 31, 63
- inequality 2, 7, 12, 16–18, 20, 22–25, 31, 36, 39, 49, 51, 67–68, 70, 81–82, 84–85, 96, 109, 112, 114–115, 134, 140, 154–157, 160, 169, 176–177, 185, 187–188, 198, 208–211, 215, 217, 221, 223–227, 235, 260, 262, 264–265, 272, 275, 277–281, 285–292, 303, 310, 315–316, 318, 320–321, 362–363, 366–369, 384
- Ing, Kaniela 61
- Jainism 63
- justice 3, 5–6, 10–11, 15–16, 27–29, 34, 36, 41, 45, 47–51, 53, 55, 62, 74–77, 83, 85–86, 91–92, 97–98, 108–110, 112–114, 118–119, 121–123, 129–130, 132, 134–135, 137–141, 143, 145–147, 151–153, 161–162, 164, 166, 168, 170–173, 175, 177–179, 182, 184–187, 190–191, 193, 195–199, 205–206, 210–217, 219–223, 225, 227–233, 237–238, 241–243, 251, 255–256, 260, 262, 266, 271–278, 280–281, 283–284, 286, 289–293, 297, 299, 304, 306–307, 310, 313–317, 320, 325–327, 329–330, 335–337, 342–347, 350–352, 361–365, 368–369, 372, 376–381, 383–386
- distributive justice 3, 5, 10–11, 15–16, 28–29, 36, 47, 51, 55, 62, 83, 85–86, 92, 110, 113–114, 118–119, 123, 129–130, 132, 137–139, 141, 143, 145–147, 151–153, 161–162, 166, 168, 170–171, 173, 175, 177, 179, 182, 184, 186–187, 191, 195–196, 198, 206, 210–212, 216, 219–222, 227, 231, 233, 237–238, 241–243, 262, 290, 297, 299, 304, 314–315, 317, 325, 327, 329–330, 335, 337, 342, 351–352, 363, 380, 386
- environmental justice 108, 362
- intergenerational justice 6, 361, 364–365, 368–369, 376–378, 380, 384–386
- Kant, Immanuel 298–300, 305–310, 314–324, 326–329
- Keynes, John Maynard 62, 68–72, 84, 151
‘Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren’ 69, 72
- Khader, Serene 100–101
- Knight, Carl 99, 124
- Kramm, Matthias 3–4, 61, 147, 151, 217, 353, 382
- Lane, Melissa 350
- Leader Maynard, Jonathan 348
- liberality 62, 73–77
- limitarianism 1–12, 15–16, 18–21, 23, 25, 27–29, 34, 45, 47–56, 61–74, 76–81, 83–87, 91–94, 106, 110, 112, 114–124, 129–147, 151–173, 175–178, 180–199, 202–217, 219–243, 247–249, 255–260, 262–267, 271–273, 275, 277–278, 280–281, 284, 289–293, 343, 361–382, 384–387
- ecological limitarianism 7, 45, 61, 134, 136–137, 335–343, 346–347, 349–350, 352–353, 377–378, 383
- economic limitarianism 6–7, 45, 61, 84, 129, 176, 362–365, 376–378, 380, 384, 386
- intergenerational limitarianism 361–362, 364, 372, 378, 380, 386
- intrinsic limitarianism 19–20, 54, 63, 66–68, 72, 78, 92, 152, 161–165, 167–168, 172, 236, 368, 382
- non-intrinsic limitarianism 19–20, 54, 63, 66, 68, 73–74, 77–78, 81, 83, 92, 161, 167
- presumptive limitarianism 5, 138, 140–142, 144–146, 169, 171, 203–217

- Locke, John 62, 80, 82–84, 151, 298–306, 309–316, 318–324, 326–329
Second Treatise of Government 300–301
- Machin, Dean 24
- Malleson, Tom 4
- Malta 177
- Malthus, Thomas 379
- Mankiw, Greg 17
- Margalit, Avishai 56, 276
- Marx, Karl 62, 65, 68–73, 75–76, 84, 87, 151
Manifesto of the Communist Party 72
- materialism 7, 73, 75–77, 120, 384
- Maurin, Éric 105
- McCloskey, Deirdre 74
- McCormick, John 252
- McKay, Stephen 31, 35
- Meijers, Tim 6, 12, 87, 147, 199, 217, 272, 293, 361, 379, 382
- Meikle, Scott 65–66
- Mélenchon, Jean-Luc 115
- Miller, David 182, 192, 315
- Mill, John Stuart 62, 81–85, 87, 151
- Mirrlees, James 122
- Monbiot, George 61
- More, Thomas 70
- Morton, Jennifer 98
- Musk, Elon 2, 211
- needs
 basic needs 1, 16, 28, 30, 70, 108, 194, 238–239, 242–243, 299, 311, 370–371, 374, 377–378, 387
 unmet urgent needs 7–9, 18, 20, 25–28, 48, 51–56, 63, 70, 83, 131, 136, 154, 156, 159–160, 183–185, 187, 189, 192, 234–235, 243, 255, 259, 271–272, 343
- neo-republicanism 6, 247–252, 255–257, 259–260, 262–267
- Netherlands, the 366, 368
- Neuhäuser, Christian 3–4, 6, 8, 11–12, 129, 177, 199, 217, 268, 271, 353, 361, 375, 387
- Neumayer, Eric 313
- Nielsen, Lasse 133, 177, 199, 223, 228, 238, 242, 373
- Niger 318
- North America 30, 43
- Nozick, Robert 16, 302
- Nussbaum, Martha 228, 271, 283–284, 328, 343–345
- O’Neill, Daniel 243
- O’Neill, Martin 19, 47
- O’Neill, Onora 298, 341
- O’Shea, Tom 248
- Ostrom, Elinor 299
- Pansardi, Pamela 265
- Parijs, Philippe van 381, 385
- paternalism 19, 93, 100, 111–112, 152, 161–162, 164
- Pavlakos, George 118, 124
- Peeters, Wouter 344
- Peffer, Rodney 290
- Pettit, Philip 247, 249–252, 261
On the People’s Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy 249
Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government 249
- Piketty, Thomas 17
- Pizzigati, Sam 61
- Plato 3, 8, 62, 64–68, 71–74, 76, 78, 81–85, 87, 151
Charmides 73
Laws 73, 78, 87
Republic 65, 71, 73, 82
- Poama, Andrei 251
- pollution 23, 177, 313, 338, 372, 374, 378
- poverty 1, 3, 7–8, 16, 25–28, 30–31, 33, 35–36, 38–39, 41–42, 46–47, 50, 63, 77–79, 96, 99–101, 112, 114, 130–137, 177, 183, 190–194, 196, 210, 212–213, 243, 255, 287, 305, 313, 362–363, 371
- poverty line 7, 28, 30–31, 33, 46, 114, 190–191, 194, 213. *See also* riches line
- power 1, 21–24, 36, 38, 40, 42, 47, 53, 92, 102, 106, 112, 115–116, 119, 133–134, 154, 194, 197, 210, 226, 234–235, 247–250, 253, 256–258, 260–261, 263–265, 271, 279, 285, 287, 291, 314–315, 362–363, 366. *See also* authority

- power of material resources (PMR) 36–40, 43–46
- prioritarianism 18, 133, 135–137, 145, 155–156, 160, 166, 168, 184, 191, 195, 210–211, 216, 222, 224, 227, 231–232, 239
- Quiggin, John 52
- Räikkä, Juha 139, 169, 204, 206
- Rawls, John 5–6, 11, 15, 47, 51, 54, 96–97, 119–120, 195–196, 228–229, 260, 272–285, 289–293, 342, 362, 368–369, 371, 380–383, 385–386. *See also* difference principle
A Theory of Justice 96–97, 342, 382
- Raz, Joseph 116–117, 121
The Morality of Freedom 116
- republicanism 247–249
- riches line 7–10, 30–33, 40–41, 43, 45, 53, 64, 180–181, 183, 185, 188–189, 255–256, 258–259, 262, 267, 362–363, 366, 371, 375, 377. *See also* poverty line
- Robeyns, Ingrid 1, 4, 8, 15, 61, 63, 83, 92, 114, 129–132, 136–137, 147, 151–159, 161–162, 165–168, 171–173, 175, 181, 186, 193, 205, 207, 209, 212, 214, 216–217, 219, 223, 225, 229–230, 232, 234–235, 242, 244, 248, 255, 258, 262, 266–268, 271–272, 293, 330, 341, 343, 353, 363–365, 372, 375–377, 382, 387
- Roemer, John 5, 11
- Rowlingson, Karen 31, 35
- Scanlon, Thomas 27–28
- Schemmel, Christian 254
- Schliesser, Eric 4, 87
- Scotland 68
- self-respect 6, 95–96, 118, 272–278, 280–283, 285–286, 288–290, 292–293
- Sen, Amartya 271
- Shields, Liam 5, 11, 16, 56, 173, 195, 199, 221, 223–224, 226
- Shue, Henry 297–298, 325, 376, 378
- Singer, Peter 8, 27–28, 136, 297, 315
- Smith, Adam 62, 68, 74–76, 81–83, 85
Theory of Moral Sentiments 74
- Socrates 65, 67, 71
- South Africa 26
- Spinoza 4
- Sreenivasan, Gopal 300–302, 304–305, 312, 314
- Stark, Cynthia 138, 272–276, 283
- status goods 198, 287–288, 373
- Stedman Jones, Daniel 23
- Stemplowska, Zosia 45
- Sterckx, Sigrid 344
- Stilz, Anna 307–308, 324
- Stutzer, Alois 98, 103
- sufficiency 5, 15, 54–55, 62, 77, 115, 130, 135, 145, 157, 165–166, 171, 187–188, 190–197, 210, 215, 219–221, 223–227, 230, 232–233, 239–240, 257, 262, 264, 302–304, 379–380
conservationist sufficiency 379
- sufficientarianism 5, 16, 18, 29, 55, 92, 112, 119, 121–122, 133, 135–137, 145, 152, 154–160, 163–164, 166–168, 171–173, 175, 180, 183–185, 187–199, 210–212, 214–216, 219–243, 256–257, 263, 345, 352, 380–381
- Sunstein, Cass 135, 189
- surplus money 8, 19, 21, 24–25, 27–28, 47, 49, 51, 53–54, 131, 153–156, 159–160, 167, 180–181, 183–184, 186, 189, 192, 234, 256, 258, 369, 373, 376–378.
See also wealth: surplus wealth
- sustainability 44–45, 291, 293, 340, 364, 373–374, 376–379
- Swan, Kyle 261
- Sweden 32
- taxes 2, 11, 17, 24, 28, 37, 47, 49, 52–55, 64, 81, 83, 93, 106, 108–110, 115–123, 135–136, 142, 209, 216, 253, 256, 263, 271, 317, 348, 368–369
- Tebble, Adam 228
- temperance 62, 73–77
- Thomas, Alan 291
- thresholds 5–11, 15–16, 18–19, 29, 42, 55, 62, 64, 77–82, 84, 114–116, 122, 129–138, 140–147, 151, 154–160, 164, 166–167, 169–171, 175–176, 180–182, 184–185, 187–196, 199, 204, 207–216,

- 219–230, 232–236, 238–243, 248–249, 255–260, 262–267, 271–272, 287, 290, 307, 310, 313–314, 316, 318–325, 327–329, 338–339, 341, 343–345, 352, 362–364, 366, 370–371, 375–376, 378–379, 382, 387
- absolute thresholds 8–10, 30–31
- relative thresholds 9–10, 30–33, 263, 370
- Thurow, Lester 111
- Timmer, Dick 2–5, 8, 10–12, 87, 129, 165, 168–171, 173, 182, 198–199, 203, 207, 212, 228, 235, 244, 258, 268, 293, 343, 345, 353, 363, 365, 387
- United Kingdom 9
- United Nations 25, 328, 347, 370
- United States of America 9, 17, 22, 61, 125, 292, 318, 382
- utilitarianism 8, 83, 155, 160–161, 168, 195, 216, 372
- utopianism 68, 70, 72, 75
- Valente, Manuel 364, 366, 387
- Vanderschraaf, Peter 228
- Volacu, Alexandru 193, 199, 251, 258
- Waldron, Jeremy 80, 300–305
- water 1, 19, 226, 311, 339–340
- wealth 1–3, 6–8, 10, 12, 15–20, 23–24, 27–28, 33, 47, 49, 51, 53, 55–56, 61–63, 67–69, 71, 73–74, 76–79, 81, 83–84, 87, 91–94, 96–99, 101–110, 112–124, 129–138, 140–147, 153–155, 157, 159–161, 163–165, 169–171, 175–178, 180–189, 191–192, 194–198, 203–217, 219–220, 223, 234–236, 248–249, 252–256, 258–259, 261–267, 271–272, 277–278, 280, 284, 287, 289–290, 303, 313, 343, 362–378, 381–382, 384–387
- extreme wealth 92, 99, 101, 104, 108–109, 112, 132, 134, 177, 197, 210, 234–236, 256, 364–365, 367–369, 372–373, 377, 384
- surplus wealth 8, 63, 130–133, 136–138, 141–142, 145–146, 155, 159, 170, 181–183, 185–186, 191, 197, 207, 211, 213, 216, 255–256, 259, 363, 366, 370, 373–375, 386. *See also* surplus money
- welfare 15, 21, 23, 33–34, 39, 55, 122, 142, 151, 159, 162–164, 202, 280, 285–286, 293, 371
- White, Stuart 111, 248
- Williamson, Thad 47
- World Bank 114
- Zwarthoed, Danielle 5, 8, 91, 129, 152, 161, 165–166, 172, 183, 236, 382

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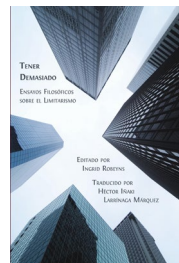
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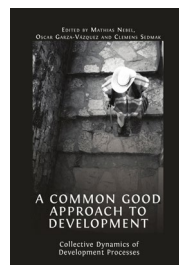


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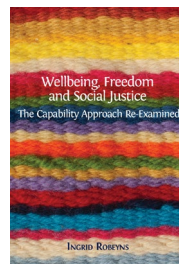


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