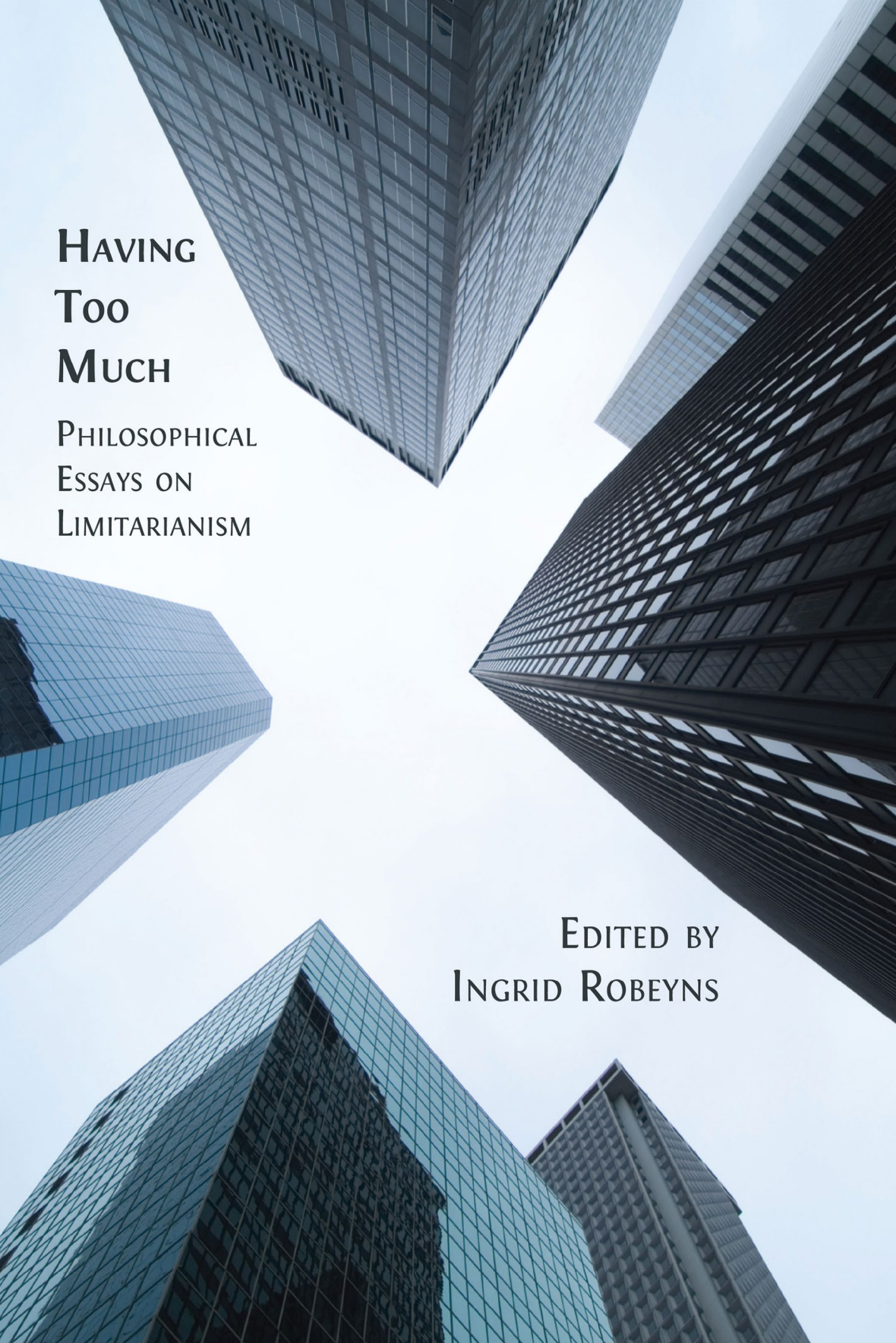

Having Too Much

Philosophical Essays on Limitarianism

Edited by
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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).

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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 Malleson (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; Alì and Caranti 2021; Caranti and Alì 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, Alì and Caranti 2021; Caranti and Alì 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 Shahar 2019; Alì and Caranti 2021; Caranti and Alì 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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