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Ingrid Robeyns (Ed.), "Having Too Much: Philosophical Essays on Limitarianism"

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Ingrid Robeyns (Ed.). *Having Too Much: Philosophical Essays on Limitarianism*. OpenBook Publishers 2023. 414 pp. $40.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781800649675); $26.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781800649668).

This volume gathers fourteen essays on limitarianism, which is the view that there should be an upper limit of wealth. Interestingly, such an idea has been considered throughout the history of philosophy. Plato, for instance, argues in the *Laws* that great wealth would engender civil conflict (744e). Nevertheless, the present account is quite timely given the increasing attention paid to economic inequality and the rising cost of living. A great deal of scholarly and policy interest focuses on the minimum amount a person ought to have, but relatively little time is spent on the upper echelons of wealth. Wouldn't wealth, after a certain limit, be better allocated in other areas? These authors, by and large, agree with this idea. The term 'limitarianism' was coined by the volume editor, Ingrid Robeyns, in 2012 and she has been working on this project since.

The volume has three aims. First, it provides a contemporary discussion of limitarianism. The second aim is to provide the reader with new arguments for limitarianism. The final aim is to bring together limitarianism and ecology – the use of ecological resources could be considered a good wherein one could have too much. In the interest of space, I will only review a selection of the key articles and finish with some of my own reflections.

In chapter 2, Robeyns outlines the basic theory of limitarianism. For Robeyns, limitarianism is a feature of distributive justice. It is a partial account since what happens beneath the maximal threshold still needs to be fleshed out (and could be so in a variety of ways). Robeyns argues specifically for non-intrinsic limitarianism, which means that having too much wealth is morally impermissible with reference to another value. This contrasts with intrinsic limitarianism, which states that being rich is intrinsically bad. She deploys two main arguments for limitarianism. The first is the democratic argument, namely the contaminating effect of excessive wealth on our democratic institutions. Surplus money is easily used to leverage political power, undermining the democratic process. Robeyns lists four such mechanisms – purchasing votes, gatekeeping, influence, and 'the workings of money as an independent political power' (21). One objection to the democratic argument is to note that inequality in the economic sphere is morally permissible. What is impermissible is when the economic inequality 'spills over' into the political sphere. Could there not be legislation to counteract this? Campaign finance reform is one example. For Robeyns, the problem will persist because economic power breeds other forms of power, notably social power.

Robeyns' second argument is what she calls the argument from unmet urgent needs. It is consequentialist and depends upon the veracity of at least one of the following circumstances: extreme global poverty, local or global disadvantages that could, in principle, be remedied with access to wealth, and collective action problems like the environmental crisis that demand financial resources. Robeyns asserts that our current world contains all three of these circumstances. Note, then, that this second argument would lose its power if these three circumstances were remedied.

In the last section, Robeyns discusses two objections to limitarianism. The first, what she calls the 'unequal opportunities objection' states that limitarianism 'deprives persons of equal opportunities' (49). If someone decides to work more, thereby generating more money, they should be allowed to do so. Robeyns accepts this curtailment of opportunity as necessary for something more valuable, namely the opportunities afforded to those less well-off.

The second objection Robeyns considers is what she calls the 'incentive objection' – since the goal is to ameliorate the three unmet urgent needs, would not a better option be some version of Rawls' difference principle wherein amassing wealth is only justified so long as it also improves the lives of those less well off? Under limitarianism, there would no longer be any incentive to amass money. Robeyns' replies that 'limitarianism is agnostic about the distribution below the wealth line, such as legitimate inequalities among the non-rich, but is more radical concering what distributive justice requires at the top end of the distribution' (51).

What happens if we drop the difference principle altogether? Does the incentive objection gain traction? Robeyns notes that the ideal optimal top marginal tax rate is approximately 70%, according to public economists. More than this, and total tax revenue goes down. Under limitarianism, the top marginal tax rate would be 100%. For Robeyns, this speaks to the cleavage between the democratic and unmet urgent needs arguments. Whereas the former cares nothing for the optimal tax rate, the latter is seriously challenged if total tax revenue decreases. Robeyns concludes that there is a tension between the two major arguments of limitarianism and multiple ways to resolve the tension. One could, for instance, prioritize urgent needs over democratic commitments.

In the sixth chapter, Robert Huseby critiques limitarianism, so I want to spend some time on that and then see the later replies. For Huseby, Robeyns' limitarianism is best seen as a 'combination of instrumental egalitarianism and sufficientarianism' (152). If so, then limitarianism is redundant. Huseby first critiques Robeyns' democratic argument by noting that inequality, not surplus wealth, is doing the damage. If it was surplus money, we should be worried about political inequality within the excessively wealthy group, which seems strange. Note that inequalities below the wealth line are permissible (or invisible) according to limitarianism. Huseby concludes by remarking that Robeyns and limitarianism start at the top end, but that it is preferable to focus on both ends – rich and poor – and seek to minimize inequality. He calls this instrumental egalitarianism.

Huseby also rejects the argument of unmet urgent needs. He notes that the limitarian imperative loses its force in a world where resources are sufficient for all to flourish. It is no longer a problem to be wealthy. Moreover, if unmet urgent needs are the focus, then instrumental sufficientarianism or egalitarianism are better, since they aim to directly tackle the problem of those who have unmet urgent needs.

In chapter 7, Robeyns replies to Huseby's objections. She stresses that limitarianism is only a 'partial'' account of justice, highlighting an underexamined facet of distributive justice. More to the point, she contends that Huseby's account of egalitarianism is 'underspecified' (187). For Robeyns, limitarianism and sufficientarianism ask fundamentally different questions. Sufficientarianism does not focus on people way above the threshold of having sufficient needs satisfied, which is the essential element of limitarianism.

In chapter 11, Christian Neuhäuser offers a novel argument for limitarianism based on self-respect. According to Neuhäuser, this argument is compatible with but distinct from, the two arguments offered by Robeyns. The argument engages with Rawls' notion of self-respect, which Neuhäuser claims is too psychological. In other words, it fails to consider the social and economic basis for self-respect. For Neuhäuser, Rawls' difference principle cannot do the required work and so should be paired with a limitarian principle.

In the closing chapter, Tim Meijers examines limitarianism in the context of future generations. How might the democratic argument apply? For Meijers, large inequalities do indeed negatively affect the interests of future generations. What about the unmet urgent needs argument? Can it be extended to future generations? What immediately arises is the issue of allocation. If a group of wealthy people invest their money in environmentally sustaining industries, and the redistributed wealth would be spent on more cars and meat by future generations, then the calculation does not result in our favor. Therefore, it is crucial that we know something substantive about where the surplus wealth is being used. Meijers concludes by noting the contrast between relatively uncontroversial nature of the limitarian project – redistribute excess wealth – and more 'ambitious' (387) accounts wherein thresholds are lower and individual limits give way to collective limits.

With the specific articles I have selected to review, I have endeavoured to give a sense of the themes and topics discussed in this volume. Throughout these articles, I was repeatedly reminded of the silence on the economic system that gives rises to these dramatic inequalities that limitarianism seeks to curtail. The different articles certainly open new avenues for research – how to tackle the allocation issue? How do we determine wealth thresholds? I recommend this book for those interested in economics, distributive justice, environmental policy, and ethics. That said, for those who think that dramatic wealth inequality requires a deeper critique of the economic system, they should look elsewhere.

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