

Rejecting Ingrid Robeyns' Defense of Limitarianism

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Abstract - This paper critically evaluates the argument put forth by the philosopher Ingrid Robeyns in her work entitled *What, if Anything, is Wrong with Extreme Wealth*. Robeyns holds the Chair Ethics of Institutions at Utrecht University, and her academic research focuses on issues pertaining to contemporary political philosophy and applied ethics. In her aforementioned publication, Robeyns defends the political theory called *limitarianism*, which holds that there should be an upper limit to the amount of income that an individual can hold. Limitarianism, like many other political philosophies, presents a view of how resources ought to be distributed in society based, in part, on certain ethical principles. Robeyns explicitly outlines two arguments in support of limitarianism as a political philosophy: (1) by eliminating excess wealth, limitarianism prevents the super-rich from undermining political equality and (2) by redistributing this excess wealth, there will be more resources available to address any urgent unmet needs or collective action problems in society. This paper carefully reviews and ultimately rejects Robeyns' defense of limitarianism as a theory of political philosophy. This paper sets out to highlight both the flaws in the basic premises of limitarianism as a theory as well as the shortcomings of the specific arguments that Robeyns' constructs in support of the theory itself.

Keywords – Limitarianism, Ingrid Robeyns, Income Limits, Wellbeing, Inequality

Introduction

The extreme wealth inequality that exists within society today represents a severe transgression against the principles of distributive justice. As such, Egalitarians and other political philosophy groups have long sought to eradicate wealth inequality from society. In attempting to do so, many philosophers have proposed theories that focus on implementing a minimum threshold of well-being for the least advantaged members of society. However, despite these efforts, major economic reports still

show global wealth inequality expanding throughout the world.¹ In light of this, many philosophers have begun considering alternative and unconventional solutions to the wealth inequality dilemma. One of these philosophers is Ingrid Robeyns, who wrote an article in 2019 proposing limitarianism as a suitable theory of wealth distribution.

Limitarianism is a newly developed ethical theory which claims that there should be an upper limit to the amount of money that an individual can rightfully hold. This is supported by the belief that above a certain level, an individual's income becomes surplus money, which limitarianism defines as money above what one needs for a fully flourishing life.² In her work, Robeyns presents two arguments in defense of the claim that it is morally impermissible for individuals to hold surplus money and be excessively rich. She refers to these two arguments as the democratic argument and the urgent unmet needs argument. In this paper, I will reject the defense of limitarianism that Ingrid Robeyns presents in her work entitled *What, if Anything, is Wrong with Extreme Wealth*. I will refute both the underlying premise of limitarianism itself as well as the two arguments that Robeyns raises as justifications of the theory. In doing so, I will highlight the ways in which Robeyns' work is riddled with flawed logic and infeasible assumptions.

In the first section of my paper, I will briefly reconstruct both of Robeyns' two main arguments in defense of limitarianism. In the ensuing section, I will begin my rebuttal of Robeyns' work by undermining the core premise of limitarianism, which states that at a certain level an individual's income becomes surplus money. After accomplishing this, I will go on in my next two sections to show that even *if* we were to accept the claim that above a certain level income becomes surplus money, Robeyns' two arguments in defense of limitarianism still fail to justify the government's right to restrict citizens from holding surplus money. I will address the democratic argument in section three before turning to the urgent unmet needs argument in section four. Finally, in the last section I will conclude my paper and summarize my position in opposition to both Robeyns and limitarianism.

Robeyns' Two Arguments in support of Limitarianism

When presenting the democratic argument for limitarianism, Robeyns suggests that the superrich have the ability to translate their surplus money into political power. Robeyns reasons that spending surplus money does not result in an objective

¹ Gabriel Zucman, "Global Wealth Inequality," *Annual Review of Economics* 11, no. 1 (2019): 109, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-080218-025852>.

² Ingrid Robeyns, "What, if Anything, is Wrong with Extreme Wealth?" *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 20, no. 3 (2019): 252, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2019.1633734>.

loss of welfare or reduction in quality of life for the rich.³ As such, this gives the rich the ability to freely spend their surplus money. In addition, the rich are incentivized to use their surplus money to purchase political power. By acquiring political power, the rich are then able to influence the passing of legislation that furthers their personal interests.⁴ According to Robeyns, the rich can acquire this power in a variety of ways. Among these include indebting politicians and political parties by funding their campaign efforts as well as controlling the public perception of politics by purchasing the rights to media outlets and lobbyists that disseminate information. Robeyns contends that acquiring political power gives the rich an unfair advantage over the poor and undermines the political equality of citizens, which she claims to be the “cornerstone of free and democratic societies.”⁵ Robeyns does consider one objection to her position, stating that critics might argue that it is the political process itself that must be fixed in order to solve this political inequality problem. In other words, rather than implementing an upper wealth limit, critics would say that it is the laws and institutions that enable the acquisition of political power that must be amended in order to create political equality within society. Robeyns however responds by saying that even if society enacted anti-corruption policies and modified existing political processes, the super-rich would still be able to find alternative ways to create asymmetrical political power. Thus, in Robeyns view, restricting individuals from possessing surplus money is the only solution to this political inequality problem.

The argument for urgent unmet needs rests upon three conditions that Robeyns presents in her paper. Robeyns claims that if at least one of these conditions hold, the argument for urgent unmet needs serves as a justification for limitarianism.⁶ The three conditions are extreme global poverty, local or global disadvantages stemming from a lack of financial resources, and urgent collective action problems. Robeyns asserts that each of these conditions, if present, possesses a “higher moral urgency than the desires that can be fulfilled through rich people’s income and wealth.”⁷ She reasons that since surplus money cannot be used to increase an individual's overall prosperity, it therefore holds no moral weight. As such, it follows that this surplus money ought to be redistributed to address any urgent unmet needs, which all hold significant moral weight. In the paper, Robeyns highlights climate change as an urgent collective action problem currently facing society which justifies the reallocation of the rich’s surplus money.

³ Robeyns, 255.

⁴ Robeyns, 255.

⁵ Robeyns, 256.

⁶ Robeyns, 257.

⁷ Robeyns, 258.

Preference Satisfaction: The Case against Objective Measures of Wellbeing

I have just provided a detailed summary of Robeyns' two arguments in defense of limitarianism. Before specifically addressing and refuting these two arguments, I wish to first challenge the core underlying premise of limitarianism as a theory. Limitarianism rests upon the premise that above a certain wealth level, additional income is unable to contribute to an individual's prosperity or overall wellbeing. The income that exceeds this specified upper wealth limit is referred to as surplus money. This conception of surplus money necessarily assumes that individual wellbeing is objectively measured. This assumption should not be blindly accepted seeing as it is inconsistent with many long-established subjectivist theories of wellbeing.

One subjective theory of welfare is preference satisfaction, which maintains that individuals derive welfare from pleasure-producing activities (Dolan 5). According to this theory, pleasure is the only thing of intrinsic value to human beings. As such, we achieve welfare or utility by attaining pleasure. However, the ways in which individuals attain pleasure are subjective in the sense that they vary from person to person. Preference satisfaction holds that individuals have unique pleasure-inducing preferences, and it is through the satisfaction of these subjective preferences that we generate welfare.⁸

The disparity that exists between people's hobbies and interests aligns with subjectivist theories of wellbeing such as preference satisfaction. It is therefore rather difficult to argue that individuals' wellbeing can be measured objectively. If we accept the indisputable fact that individuals have different interests and preferences, it reasonably follows that we must also accept that the amount of money that individuals spend on achieving wellbeing is dependent on these personalized interests and preferences. If this is true, how can we set a uniform upper income limit which applies to everyone? Take an example of two individuals with different passions. Individual A loves surfing more than any other activity in the world. Individual A is lucky that surfing happens to be a relatively inexpensive hobby. Conversely, Individual B is passionate about traveling. In fact, Individual B derives a comparative amount of utility from traveling as Individual A does from surfboarding. However, given the expensive nature of traveling, Individual B spends a far greater amount of money on travelling each year than Individual A does on surfing. This simplistic

⁸ Paul Dolan, Richard Layard, and Robert Metcalfe, "Measuring Subjective Wellbeing for Public Policy," *Office for National Statistics* (February 2011): 5, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/da18/13bd5db36f8c3c616e0c29b9ec66d09da563.pdf>.

example highlights a key problem with the notion of a uniform income limit. Two individuals will very likely have to spend different amounts of money in order to reach the same level of wellbeing on account of each individual's unique preferences and the costs associated with satisfying these preferences. Thus, limitarianism fails to recognize that welfare cannot be objectively equated across individuals. As such, I contest that the subjectivity of welfare requires a unique and personalized upper income limit be set for each individual in order to satisfy the limitarian concept of surplus money.

Despite the infeasibility of the notion, suppose the government did in fact set a personalized upper income limit for each member of society based on his or her unique preferences. Are we nevertheless convinced that above this upper limit, an individual is unable to use any additional income to generate prosperity or wellbeing? Both prosperity and wellbeing are associated with an individual's level of happiness, which is generally accepted to be an unquantifiable state of emotion. How then can we definitively say that a maximum value exists on an individual's welfare? In order to deny this statement, we would be forced to accept welfare as having an infinite range of values, which I argue is entirely plausible.

There are seemingly two ways in which welfare could be infinite. First, individuals could continue to gain additional welfare by spending money on activities and goods that satisfy their pleasures. If an individual, for instance, derived pleasure from being the most powerful person alive, then perhaps he or she would continue to boost their welfare infinitely until they acquired all the wealth in the world (which is effectively impossible). I must admit however that this example is a bit preposterous in nature, and it does seem likely that individuals at a certain point would no longer be able to acquire additional goods that generated welfare.

Welfare can also possess infinite value if people generate utility through altruistic acts. In this instance, by helping others achieve prosperity, an individual also increases his or her own wellbeing. Individuals may get satisfaction from choosing their own charities to contribute to rather than having the government redistribute their money for them. For example, if somebody was passionate about cancer research, they could seemingly donate an infinite amount of money to this cause and thereby generate an infinite amount of welfare. Individuals could also continue to gain welfare by accumulating money and saving it with the intention of passing the wealth down to their offspring. If an individual gains welfare from knowing that their future kin are financially secure, each additional dollar of income generates additional welfare by guaranteeing that another future generation is financially well-off. These two examples of infinite altruistic welfare generating acts invalidate the limitarian claim that surplus money cannot be used to generate additional wellbeing.

I have just disproved the concept of surplus money and the assumption that individual's wellbeing is objectively measured. Nevertheless, let us momentarily forget about my previous work and instead pretend that limitarianism is right in asserting

that wellbeing can be objectively and uniformly measured and that above a certain level an individual can no longer generate welfare from additional income. In this scenario, how would we go about setting this income limit? I contest that there would never be a general consensus as to how to go about objectively measuring wellbeing even if we believed that it could be objectively measured. Wellbeing has an interpretative meaning, and as such it is highly likely that individuals possess many different conceptions of wellbeing. It seems exceedingly unlikely that there would ever be complete agreement upon the way in which to measure wellbeing. If, then, there will always be those who disagree with the setting of the income limit, is it not the case that there will always be an element of arbitrariness associated with the exact designation of this limit? If there is always subjectivity involved in setting the income threshold, there can be no certainty that we are not unjustly taking from individuals' money that could be used towards increasing their own personal wellbeing. Thus, even when accepting this underlying premise of limitarianism, we find that the infeasibility of setting an upper income limit renders the entire process arbitrary, thereby invalidating the objectivity of the limitarian concept of surplus money.

Refuting the Democratic Argument for Limitarianism

In the preceding section, I explained why the core underlying premise of limitarianism does not hold. However, in the following two sections, for the sake of evaluating Robeyns' two arguments, we shall pretend that this premise of limitarianism is both ideologically sound and feasible. I will operate under the pretense that there is in fact an upper income limit that can be set, above which an individual's income is classified as surplus money which cannot be used to increase his or her personal wellbeing. It is under this veil that I will evaluate the two main arguments that Robeyns uses in her paper to justify the government's right to create a 100% tax rate on individual's surplus money.

The democratic argument for limitarianism is concerned with the potential for individuals to translate their surplus money into political power. This, according to Robeyns, poses a fundamental threat to democracy by undermining the political equality of citizens. While I accept that the ability to purchase political power represents a grave danger to a well-functioning democracy, I reject the idea that confiscating an individual's surplus money solves this problem. Robeyns writes, "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.... one can better use that money for political influence so that legislation, when implemented, serves one's

interests.”⁹ Robeyns stipulates that because this surplus money has no real impact on wellbeing, it will be used to buy political influence. However, if purchasing political power ‘serves one’s interests’ as Robeyns writes in her work, then this act would seemingly increase an individual’s overall welfare. As such, I see no reason why an individual would be strictly limited to only using their allotment of surplus money to acquire political power. Manipulating the rules of society to serve one’s own interest can create enormous benefits to an individual’s life. On account of the significant rewards that come from acquiring political power, I attest that an individual would be incentivized to purchase political power even if they did not possess surplus money. In fact, it could be argued that as long as an individual has wealth in excess of that which is needed to attain basic necessities such as food, water and shelter, there will always be a temptation to use money to purchase political power.

In her work, Robeyns denies the objection that it is the political process, institutions and statutes that must be modified in order to prevent individuals from acquiring political power and undermining political equality. I however do not believe that Robeyns is able to successfully overcome this objection. If the political system is still designed in a way that gives citizens the ability to purchase political influence, I do not see how implementing an upper income limit will prevent them from doing so. Considering that currency in and of itself has no intrinsic value, everything pertaining to money is relative. While instituting an upper income limit reduces the wealth gap between the richest and poorest members of society, it also reduces the purchasing power of the rich. Consequently, the amount of money needed to purchase political power would also decrease in proportion to this decrease in wealth of the rich. As such, if an upper income limit was implemented, the wealthy would still have the ability to purchase political power and this imbalance between the rich and poor would still exist. As long as the political process still enables individuals to buy influence, political inequality will remain within society. Robeyns argues that without surplus money individuals would not purchase political power. However, she fails to account for the basic economic principle that states that prices in the economy fall in the long run as the supply of money decreases. Even if the government confiscated an individual's surplus money, the rich would still have more freedom with which to spend their money than the poor. This would put the rich in position to continue to take advantage of the political system and unfairly buy political power in order to serve their personal interests. Thus, if the justification for the democratic argument is that an upper income limit produces strict political equality, then this does hold as a defense of limitarianism.

Refuting the Urgent Unmet Needs Argument

⁹ Robeyns, 255.

In the last section, I showed how instituting an upper income limit fails to accomplish Robeyns' goal of creating political equality within society. Instead, I demonstrated that the solution to this political inequality problem which Robeyns presents is not limitarianism but rather reforming the political institutions and statues that enable the purchasing of political power. Similarly, in this section, I show how Robeyns is misguided in believing that limitarianism acts as a solution to addressing these urgent unmet needs that exist within the world. If the argument is that these urgent unmet needs require immediate financial resources, I contest that instituting an upper income limit actually restricts the amount of money that can be redistributed towards these causes and therefore does not represent the optimal way to address these needs.

Robeyns does an excellent job of making the case that all of the three types of urgent unmet needs currently exist within our world. Additionally, it seems undeniable that each of these conditions requires immediate attention and funding on account of their extreme levels of severity. As such, it seems that the fundamental purpose of Robeyns' argument is that we need to redistribute as much money as is morally permissible towards these urgent unmet needs. If we can collectively agree that this is Robeyns' objective, then we must recognize that limitarianism fails to best accomplish this goal. Economists have shown that the tax rate which generates the highest amount of revenue is somewhere around 70%. At the rate of 100% which limitarianism supports, individuals will retain none of their income above the wealth limit and will therefore have no incentive to ever exceed the income limit. Thus, in order to create the greatest amount of tax revenue and subsequent funding for these urgent unmet needs, Robeyns ought to abandon limitarianism in favor of a progressive taxation rate.

Robeyns addresses this objection in her paper and refers to it as the 'negative incentive objection'. Robeyns acknowledges that limitarianism may not generate the optimal amount of tax revenue and admits that a progressive tax rate could be a better solution for the urgent unmet needs dilemma. Despite the strength of this objection, Robeyns responds by saying two things. First, she says that if we are more concerned about addressing the political inequality in society than the urgent unmet needs, limitarianism is still a valid economic design. In the previous section, I explained why implementing an upper income limit would fail to solve the political inequality problem. Second, even if a progressive tax rate is optimal for addressing the urgent unmet needs, Robeyns writes that 'limitarianism as a moral ideal would be unaffected.'¹⁰ In the second section of my paper, I rejected the limitarian conception

¹⁰ Robeyns, 262.

of surplus money, thereby undermining the moral permissibility of taking 100% of an individual's income if we cannot be sure that this income cannot be used to increase his or her own wellbeing. Considering that I have already disproven both of Robeyns' responses to the negative incentive objection, we must conclude that this objection renders the urgent unmet needs argument invalid as a defense of limitarianism.

Conclusion

I have rejected Robeyns' defense of limitarianism in her work *What, if Anything, is Wrong with Extreme Wealth*. After reconstructing Robeyns' position, I first examined limitarianism as a whole and explained why the underlying premise of the theory does not hold. I argue that wellbeing cannot be objectively measured, and as such the limitarian concept of surplus money is invalid. I then refuted both of the arguments that Robeyns raises in her paper as justifications for limitarianism. I showed that instituting an upper wealth limit does not eradicate political inequality from society and that only by modifying the political process itself may we eliminate the ability for the rich to purchase political power. Additionally, I showed that the urgent unmet needs argument fails to overcome the negative objection incentive. I argue that if Robeyns wishes to reallocate the maximum amount of morally permissible wealth towards these conditions, a progressive taxation system is more optimal than an upper wealth limit. Thus, by systematically evaluating and refuting each element of Robeyns' argument, I have in this paper shown limitarianism to be an indefensible theory of wealth distribution.

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