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Review of *Having Too Much: Philosophical Essays on Limitarianism*, edited by Ingrid Robeyns, Cambridge, UK, Open Book Publishers, 2023, x + 400 pages, ISBN Digital (PDF) 978-1-80064-968-2

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Limitarianism is yet another philosophical attempt to establish universal values, in this case about the view that exceeding a certain maximum resource limit is not morally acceptable. Previous efforts to think about these limitations go as far as to Plato's *Laws*, which supported the idea that 'ownership should not be more than four times the poverty limit at most' (quoted on p. 3), or later, a popular initiative of Switzerland labelled *1:12*, which was finally rejected, to propose 'a law that would have prohibited firms from offering salaries more than twelve times higher than the lowest salary' (p. 115). However, given the extensive analytical coverage, with references to the essential literature that could not be included in the book, the editor correctly claims that this collective volume is the first contemporary reference (p. xviii) on which this philosophical current will be grounded. In addition, several other editorial features give their efforts the visibility they deserve, such as financial support from the European Union, which also extended to the Fair Limits project (2017-2022), free online distribution in the Open Access system, and its circulation in Spanish translation [1].

The ambition to provide a reference volume is achieved through efforts at two levels. The first is a clear and almost didactic contribution to defining the field of philosophical reflection on the responsible limits of wealth, its basic concepts and theories. The second is the philosophical debate about the limits of limitarianism and what it cannot explain in a complete (ethical) theory. We will give a sketch of these contributions, one at a time.

The responsible limits of wealth

The volume mostly deals with economic limitarianism or 'limitarianism of financial resources', which is its 'most prominent version' (p. 365), particularly with its *non-intrinsic* variant according to which wealth is morally non-permissible for a reason other than 'being rich is intrinsically bad' (i.e. the *intrinsic* variant) (p. 29). Adherents are supposedly expected to agree on an outlook composed of reason, justification, and implication as follows:

- Reason: It is not morally permissible to have more than a certain upper limit of resources.
- Justification: Limitation of wealth is justified for the protection of two values: (1) political equality and (2) the meeting of unmet urgent needs (such as tackling global poverty).
- Implication: Action is necessary to set 'relevant thresholds ... to know who counts as rich, and who doesn't' (p. 29) and 'to determine what constitutes a just distribution and how to achieve it' (p. 15).

Chapter 2 (Having too much), unusually long at over 40 pages, lays out the two value premises of the economic argument of setting upper limits on wealth accumulation. Each of the subsequent chapters scrutinizes this view of distributive justice with contributions from scholars of political science, history, and moral and political philosophy, that excel at exploring exhaustively the virtue of a certain wealth ceiling. This authorship brings to mind Sherlock Holmes' witty observation about the quiet dog: does the exclusion of economists from a discussion centred on the fundamental aspects of economic science, such as wealth accumulation, hint at an important underlying message?

Defending the first value premise, which is the value of democracy, seems to hang most heavily in favour of accepting a maximum wealth threshold. The implications of extreme wealth on democracy are apparently harmful. It is ironic that the definitive line of defence comes from the core of the orthodox economics. Possession of wealth, or of money to be precise, is subjected, as the argument goes, to the law-like regularity of the decreasing marginal utility of money—

where additional wealth has diminishing personal benefit but can be instrumental in allowing the wealthy to exert disproportionate influence, gain political power, and hence to distort the democratic ideal of political equality (pp. 20-1). In academic terms, ‘too much’ is translated as ‘surplus money’ defined as the amount of money (or resources) exceeding what is necessary ‘to fully flourish in life’ (pp. 15, 167).

It appears somewhat simplistic to suggest that surplus wealth could always bring about negative societal consequences, yet the authors' sole focus – an ‘isolationist’ viewpoint as one contributor remarks (p. 377) – on this dark interpretation is still noteworthy. As they exemplify, studies across psychology and sociology demonstrate that wealth, when hoarded or improperly utilized, has the capacity to diminish collective societal duties and threaten individual moral and personal responsibility. The aggregation of empirical research highlights that this topic remains dynamic and offers ample opportunities for continued scrutiny. Still, the support for limitarianism is markedly more influential regarding the allocation of surplus wealth to cater to pressing needs that have not yet been addressed. This volume offers a comprehensive look at how setting limits on material possession can address pressing social and environmental issues. Limitarianism, for example, explores the ideas of ensuring the fair distribution of resources necessary to meet everyone's basic needs (p. 175), the fairly use of the Earth's capacity to absorb greenhouse gases (p. 297), or, by removing large inequalities today, the capacity of future citizens to live as democratic equals (p. 369). These values provide a more straightforward way to set the limit on wealth, both at *individual-level* and *aggregate level* (p. 336), although we believe that this is only possible within jurisdictional boundaries.

The authors acknowledge that limitarianism does not seek to assign weights to several potential destinations of surplus wealth (p. 370) or metrics ‘about how much individual wealth actually represents a danger to democracy’, which are tasks left for empirical studies (p. 267). For a school of thought driven by a quantitative view, i.e. the marginal utility of money, this qualification can be seen as a major weakness. Additionally, the existence of unsolved issues is brought to our attention.

Unsettled questions

On the one hand, the philosophical position of limitarianism is subject to criticism in the field of distributive justice, a concept in political philosophy that concerns the fair allocation of resources, wealth, and opportunities among members of a community. One can readily expand the focus beyond purely economic considerations to include viewpoints that advocate for additional boundaries of human interest, as is the case with ‘ecological limitarianism’ (p. 377) and ‘intergenerational limitarianism’ (p. 380). Nevertheless, the authors raise questions about the legitimacy of limitarianism based on sufficiently distinct assumptions. It is possible, as some authors recommend, to accept a pluralist vision (p. 175) to include also approaches such as egalitarianism, sufficientarianism, and prioritarianism, each proposing to achieve fairness and justice (p. 184). For example, our deliberations may be based on a *multi-threshold* theory of distributive justice, consisting of both a sufficientarian threshold and a limitarian threshold, or alternatively a ‘lower’ threshold and an ‘upper’ threshold (p. 238). Another approach involves examining, as some propose, the moral responsibilities that are adequately encompassed by the other distributional principles (pp. 152, 309), rather than isolating the problems linked to the growing accumulation of wealth (pp. 17, 177).

On the other hand, limitarianism does relatively little to show the threshold needed to define the wealth line. Empirical studies should reveal how much individual wealth, and which economic resources (income, wealth, or inheritance) represent ‘a danger to democracy’ (p. 267). However, there are suggestions to ensure that everyone receives their permissible share of wealth, for example procedures, such as votes or consulting experts (p. 136), or policies, such as wage regulation, lifetime inheritance limits or redistribution of money above the limit threshold (pp. 180-1). Even drastic measures, such as a 100% wealth and income tax above a certain wealth limit (p. 93) were advocated, although economists, we are told, would prefer to accept instead that ‘seventy per cent to be an efficient upper/highest marginal tax rate’ (p. 271).

It appears that moral pledges of the ‘take it or leave it’ nature, as proposed by thinkers like Singer (2016), may seem more acceptable when presented as ethical advice to redistribute (surplus) wealth. However, they largely fail to address the

fundamental issue that limitarianism seeks to resolve: how can we establish a consensus that ensures every citizen has an equal chance to exert political influence? This seems to be the fundamental controversy for which we need limitarianism. 'Justice as fairness' lies at the core of our culture (Graeber 2001, p. 4) and imposes moral obligations on us. In the words of Rawls, the vagaries of social and historical circumstances 'should not affect our discussion about what should constitute a fair agreement between free and equal persons' (Rawls ([2001] 2003), pp. 16-17). Although the limitarian reflection may revise its applied ethical objectives, we believe it will remain fertile ground for the study of ideas on democratic participation from the point of view of material possession. The merit of this volume is that it illustrates this conclusion with in-depth and comprehensive studies that also shed light on the steps to be taken. It is very appropriate to use the authors' own words: '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' (p. 387).

Endnotes

[1] The Open Access version of this book can be retrieved from <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/OBP.0338#resources>, where has been made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives (CC-BY-NC-ND) 4.0 license.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that this research has no conflict of interest.

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