



Limitarianism, Upper Limits, and Minimal Thresholds

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Abstract

Limitarianism holds that there is an upper limit to how many resources, such as wealth and income, people can permissibly have. In this article, I examine the conceptual structure of limitarianism. I focus on the upper limit and the idea that resources above the limit are ‘excess resources’. I distinguish two possible limitarian views about such resources: (i) that excess resources have zero moral value for the holder; and (ii) that excess resources do have moral value for the holder but that their claim to such resources is outweighed by other normative concerns. Moreover, I argue that, depending on the values limitarianism seeks to promote, limitarians should care about the number of people with excess resources or the total amount of excess resources (or both), that they can adopt redistributive measures and/or predistributive measures, and that some versions of limitarianism should take into account the distribution of risk among those above the riches line.

Keywords Limitarianism · Distributive justice · Upper limit · Resources · Wealth · Robeyns

Introduction

Limitarianism holds that there is an upper limit to how many resources, such as income and wealth, people can permissibly have. Ingrid Robeyns (2017, 2019, 2022, 2024), who coined this view, argues that people should not have more resources than are necessary for a fully flourishing life. People who have more resources than are needed for such a life have ‘excess resources’, and limitarianism says that these excess resources should be redistributed to meet unmet urgent needs and to alleviate

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significant political inequalities, among other things.¹ In a nutshell, then, limitarianism holds that it is morally impermissible to possess excess resources.

Over the past few years, two related but distinct debates about limitarianism have emerged. The first debate focuses on the main claims and distributive implications of limitarianism. This includes, for example, reflections on which arguments, if any, support upper limits, how the upper limit should be determined, and whether limitarianism offers plausible and distinctive guidance in distributive justice (Robeyns 2017; 2022, pp. 5–16; Volacu and Dumitru 2019; Timmer 2019; Caranti and Ali 2021; Huseby 2022, pp. 232–243; Flanigan and Freiman 2022; Berkey 2022; Axelsen and Nielsen 2022; Hickey 2023; Meijers 2023; Volacu, forthcoming). The second debate focuses on the value of limitarianism in political philosophy and societal debate more generally. This feeds into debates about how academic political philosophers can or should theorize about justice and institutional design (Robeyns 2022, pp. 249–253, 265–268; Huseby 2022, pp. 243–246; Halldenius 2022).

This article contributes to the first debate. I aim to spell out the main claims and distributive implications of limitarianism in distributive justice. I do so by examining the conceptual structure of limitarianism, focusing on the upper limit above which having more resources is morally impermissible. However, I will also touch on the second debate. For example, I will argue that one's view on excess resources and upper limits should be responsive to the kind of view one considers limitarianism to be.

My method is comparative: I will compare and contrast upper limits above which people have too many resources to *minimal thresholds* below which people do not have enough (Casal 2007; Shields 2012). Similarities and differences between upper limits and minimal thresholds have so far remained under-theorized, and this is a missed opportunity.² First, there is an ongoing debate about what constitutes the core of limitarianism. Because upper limits and excess resources are part of this core, a thorough analysis of these concepts can benefit our understanding of limitarianism.

Second, comparing minimal thresholds and upper limits benefits our assessment of both current and prospective versions of limitarianism. For example, one important difference between limitarian views is whether excess resources are considered to have zero moral value for the holder, or that they do have moral value for the

¹ Robeyns (2019, pp. 258–260) also defends an ecological argument for limitarianism. Recently, other arguments for limitarianism have been proposed as well, which ground limitarianism on autonomy (Zwarthoed 2018), self-respect (Neuhäuser 2023), freedom from domination (Icardi 2023), and epistemic constraints (Timmer 2021a; 2023a), among other things. On the distinct moral problems brought about by extreme wealth, see also Axelsen and Nielsen (forthcoming).

² This does not mean that no similarities and differences have been noted. In particular, the relation between limitarianism and *sufficientarianism*, which draws on minimal thresholds, has received quite some attention. First, both limitarianism and sufficientarianism call for redistributing valuable goods to those below that threshold (Huseby 2020, pp. 211–212; Robeyns 2022, p. 261). Second, limitarianism is primarily concerned with the duty-bearers of distributive justice; sufficientarianism focuses on the recipients of distributive justice (Volacu and Dumitru 2019, p. 250; Robeyns 2022, pp. 263–264). Third, limitarianism considers benefits to those who have too many resources as particularly *wasteful*. This notion of waste does not play a central role in sufficientarianism (Robeyns 2022, p. 263). On whether sufficientarianism entails limitarianism and vice versa, see also Hickey (2023).

holder but that their claim to such resources is outweighed by other normative concerns. In the first case, nothing of moral significance to the holder is lost if excess resources are redistributed. In the second case, however, something of moral significance to the holder *is* lost if excess resources are redistributed, but this loss is all-things-considered justified. This matters for the distributive implications of limitarianism, its upper limit, and its institutional guidance.

Third, a comparison of upper limits and minimal thresholds helps to answer questions regarding the level of the upper limit, whether limitarians should endorse a single threshold or multiple thresholds, and how limitarianism might resolve conflicts between the values it sets out to promote (see also Robeyns 2023, pp. 9–11). One upshot of my analysis, for example, is that limitarians must take a stance on the value of *reaching* the upper limit, which has been widely discussed in debates on minimal thresholds (Shields 2012, pp. 103–104; 2017, pp. 92–97; Timmer 2021b, pp. 435–439; 2023b, pp. 497–498). This choice greatly affects the distributive guidance that limitarianism offers. Another, related upshot is that limitarians must say what should happen with excess resources and how we should distribute burdens above the upper limit. Here too we can learn from debates on minimal thresholds how to answer these questions.

This article is structured as follows. In the first section, ‘[Introducing Limitarianism](#)’, I introduce limitarianism as a partial and instrumental view in distributive justice. In the next section, ‘[The Nature of Excess Resources](#)’, I distinguish two different interpretations of excess resources: (i) excess resources have zero moral value for the holder (ZERO-WEIGHT); or (ii) excess resources do have moral value for the holder but their claim to such resources is outweighed by other normative concerns (OUTWEIGHED). In the section titled ‘[What Should Happen with Excess Resources?](#)’, I discuss how, according to limitarianism, excess resources should be redistributed and I explore some of its implications for institutional design. In the subsequent section, ‘[The Distribution of Risk Above the Upper Limit](#)’, I argue that advocates of ZERO-WEIGHT should be concerned with the distribution of risk among those above the riches line. In the final section, ‘[Conclusion](#)’, I summarize my argument.

Introducing Limitarianism

Limitarians endorse:

The limitarian thesis. There is an upper limit to how many resources people can permissibly have (Robeyns 2017, p. 1; Timmer 2021a, p. 760).

The idea that people should not have more than a certain amount of resources is central to limitarianism. As Axelsen and Nielsen (2022) put it, limitarianism holds that it is ‘*distinctively* unjust to leave [these resources] in their possession, when [they] could instead be used to meet unmet urgent needs or alleviate significant political inequalities’ (p. 738). Limitarians might disagree on the level of this upper limit, why we need such an upper limit, or on the nature of the resources that are to be

limited (e.g. wealth, income, emissions, natural resources). But every limitarian view endorses the limitarian thesis.

Two specific features of limitarianism merit mentioning here. First, limitarianism is a *partial* view about distributive justice.³ It does not implausibly claim that a distribution is just if and only if no one has too many resources. An upper limit to resources does not cover everything that matters from the standpoint of distributive justice. It must be combined with principles that guide the distribution of resources below it. Second, limitarianism is an *instrumental* view.⁴ It says that limiting resources promotes important values that are not themselves limitarian. But limitarianism does not limit resources for the sake of limiting resources as such.

One might hold that there is a tension between viewing limitarianism as a partial view, which means that it offers no complete theory of distributive justice, and saying that it should specify how excess resources should be redistributed.⁵ As a partial view, limitarianism may not need to specify how such resources should be redistributed. But this depends on what distinguishes partial theories from complete theories of distributive justice, which is likely a gradual rather than a binary distinction. For Robeyns (2017), the fact that limitarianism is a partial theory means that the view as such ‘can be specified in a way in which it is agnostic regarding what distributive justice requires for those who are not maximally flourishing’ (p. 1). Elsewhere, Robeyns (2022) says that its partial nature means that limitarianism can be ‘combined with different views of what justice requires below the threshold’ (p. 256; see also p. 264), and that it can be part of a pluralist account of distributive justice, fit for the real-world circumstances in which it aims to offer guidance. Likewise, she suggests that its partial nature means that limitarianism can be complemented with an array of other distributive and non-distributive measures (2022, p. 257; see also Timmer 2019).

I agree that limitarians are well advised to embrace the partial nature of their view and defend upper limits as part of a broader, pluralist account of distributive justice. However, this does not render the question of how excess resources should be redistributed irrelevant to limitarianism. Limitarianism is also an instrumental view, which means that excess resources ought to be employed towards the fulfilment of the moral ideals that actual distributive states prevent from occurring, such as realizing political equality, meeting urgent needs, or promoting autonomy (Zwarthoed 2018), freedom (Icardi 2023), or self-respect (Neuhäuser 2023). For this reason, Robeyns (2017, p. 1) maintains that her *own* limitarian view is not agnostic as to what happens below the limitarian upper limit, even though it does not specify everything that matters from the point of view of distributive justice. More generally, if there is an instrumental upper limit to how many resources people can permissibly have, this presumably tells us something (though not everything) about how resources below the threshold should be allocated. The moral values that render

³ For limitarianism as a partial view, see Robeyns (2017, p. 1; 2022, p. 256).

⁴ For a critical discussion of *intrinsic* limitarianism, see Huseby (2022, pp. 238–241).

⁵ I thank a reviewer for this point.

having excess resources morally impermissible will offer at least some guidance in how resources should be distributed below the threshold.

Limitarian upper limits, then, denote the point above which people have too many resources. Minimal thresholds denote the exact opposite: the point below which people do not have enough. Sufficiency is arguably the most well-known view that draws on such thresholds. Sufficiency theorists disagree on the level of the minimal threshold and on what exactly makes this threshold morally significant. Perhaps that bringing people above that threshold is the appropriate way to treat people as having equal moral importance (Frankfurt 1987), or it is the appropriate response to a salient moral requirement of compassion (Crisp 2003), or perhaps it is (part of) what distributive justice requires (Huseby 2010; Shields 2012; Axelsen and Nielsen 2015; Timmer 2022). But all of these sufficiency views commit to a minimal threshold, and they maintain that people have weighty non-instrumental reasons to secure at least enough to meet this threshold (Shields 2012, p. 106).

Importantly, minimal thresholds are commonly considered to denote significant shifts in moral value, where benefits below it have weighted if not lexical priority over benefits above that threshold (Huseby 2020, p. 211). What happens below the minimal threshold is more important than what happens above it (e.g. large losses above the minimal threshold might be justified if they lead to minor gains below the minimal threshold). Limitarians endorse the strongest possible version of such a priority view. They say that it is impermissible to have resources above the upper limit. Therefore, providing resources below that upper limit *always* has priority over providing resources above it.

In what follows, I first examine the limitarian concept of excess resources (section ‘[The Nature of Excess Resources](#)’). I then turn to how excess resources should be redistributed (sections ‘[What Should Happen with Excess Resources?](#)’ and ‘[The Distribution of Risk Above the Upper Limit](#)’).

The Nature of Excess Resources

If there is an upper limit to how many resources people can permissibly have, does this mean that people should be able to reach this threshold, or even be aided in doing so? If people should not have more resources than are needed for a fully flourishing life, this seems to be the case. They should be able to acquire the resources necessary to live such a life, but not *more* than that. This seems to turn the upper limit above which resources count as excess resources into a high minimal threshold. And so, we might ask: does limitarianism say that it is valuable for people to reach the upper limit?

Robert Huseby (2022) answers this question affirmatively. He argues that Robeyns’s view and similar specifications of limitarianism collapse into sufficiency because they assume that there are weighty non-instrumental reasons to secure enough resources. According to Huseby,

[limitarianism prefers] distributions in which no one has surplus wealth (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, 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, and 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 [...]. (Huseby 2022, p. 245; see also pp. 235–236; pp. 242–243)

We can distil the following argument from this passage:

The sufficiency argument. Limitarianism holds that resources above the upper limit should be distributed to those who are below the upper limit. Therefore, limitarianism holds that we have weighty non-instrumental reasons to ensure that people reach the upper limit.

If correct, this argument establishes that the limitarian upper limit is a high minimal threshold. Limitarianism would then combine a high minimal threshold with the claim that possessing resources above that threshold is morally impermissible. I want to examine this argument in detail for two reasons. First, it helps us to understand what limitarians might say about the value of reaching the upper limit. Second, it sheds light on what, according to limitarianism, renders it morally impermissible to possess resources above the upper limit. That is, it tells us something about the nature of excess resources.

According to Robeyns (2017, p. 12), resources above the upper limit are excess resources because they do not contribute to the holder's flourishing and therefore lack moral weight. However, Robeyns's conception of excess resources is not the only possible conception. We can distinguish at least two conceptions, which differ in their specification of the nature of excess resources and on how the limitarian upper limit should be determined.⁶

ZERO-WEIGHT. Excess resources have zero moral value for the holder.

OUTWEIGHED. Excess resources have moral value for the holder but their claim to such resources is outweighed by other normative concerns.

I will argue that Robeyns defends ZERO-WEIGHT and holds that we have weighty non-instrumental reasons to ensure that people can live a fully flourishing life.⁷

⁶ In earlier work, I distinguished between a lexical and non-lexical version of OUTWEIGHED, but I will leave that aside here (Timmer 2021a, p. 761). Axelsen and Nielsen (2022, Sec. 2) distinguish between a *flourishing claim* which 'states that money above a certain threshold does not contribute to a person's flourishing', and an *injustice claim* which 'states that withholding surplus money in the face of conflicting claims is distinctively unjust'. This injustice claim resonates with the idea behind OUTWEIGHED.

⁷ I will assume that, according to ZERO-WEIGHT, lacking moral value for the holder is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a resource to count as a surplus resource. This makes ZERO-WEIGHT compatible with the additional claim that (some) non-excess resources too can have zero moral value for the holder. If so, it would be morally permissible to possess such resources even though they do not contribute to the holder's flourishing. I thank a reviewer for this point.

But limitarians can also defend *OUTWEIGHED*. For example, they can say that excess resources ought to be redistributed because meeting urgent needs outweighs a concern for people's resources above some point, even if those resources would have moral value for the holder (e.g. even if it would contribute to their flourishing). This argument assumes *OUTWEIGHED* rather than *ZERO-WEIGHT*. But both views hold that there is an upper limit to how many resources people can permissibly have.

I will now examine *ZERO-WEIGHT* (section '*ZERO-WEIGHT*') and *OUTWEIGHED* in more detail (section '*OUTWEIGHED*').

ZERO-WEIGHT

According to *ZERO-WEIGHT*, resources above the upper limit have zero moral value for the holder. Robeyns, for example, argues that this is because such resources do not contribute to the holder's flourishing.⁸ But if that is the reason that resources above the threshold lack moral value for the holder, resources below that threshold do have moral value for the holder, namely by contributing to their flourishing. For this reason, Huseby (2022) says that 'flourishing appears to be an *intrinsic sufficientarian* value with an upper threshold' (p. 232, fn.13) and that Robeyns defends a version of '*intrinsic sufficientarianism*' (p. 236). If, as Robeyns entertains, people should not have more resources than are necessary for a fully flourishing life, it seems to follow that it is valuable to live a fully flourishing life. Our reasons to reach this flourishing threshold might not be very weighty (or in any case, not as weighty as our reasons to reach a low minimal threshold, such as a poverty threshold). But we do have at least *some* non-instrumental reason to reach that threshold. Only when people reach the threshold can they live a fully flourishing life (or reach a different standard, if one adopts another metric).

Limitarians who endorse *ZERO-WEIGHT* should explain why the point above which resources lack moral value for the holder determines the level of upper limit. Consider Robeyns's helpful distinction between 'excess resources' and 'surplus resources'.⁹ Excess resources are resources that are morally impermissible to possess. Surplus resources are resources that lack moral value for the holder. In Robeyns's case, surplus resources are resources that do not contribute to someone's flourishing. On one interpretation of Robeyns's view, surplus resources are a special case of the more general notion of excess resources (Robeyns 2022, pp. 5–6). But we cannot simply say that surplus resources *are* excess resources. The fact that it is morally impermissible to have excess resources is not solely explained by the fact that they have zero moral value for the holder.¹⁰ Instead, it is explained by the fact

⁸ See Robeyns (2017, pp. 1, 14–30). See also what Axelsen and Nielsen (2022, Sec. 1) label the 'Standard Defence' of limitarianism.

⁹ See Robeyns (2022, pp. 5–6). Note that Robeyns uses the labels 'excess wealth' and 'surplus wealth'. I have adapted Robeyns's phrasing here to fit my usage of 'resources' as the metric.

¹⁰ Unless one defends an intrinsic version of limitarianism according to which having excess resources is morally impermissible in and of itself. On intrinsic limitarianism, see Robeyns (2017, pp. 4–6) and Huseby (2022, pp. 238–243).

that those resources lack moral value for the holder *and* that they can be used to fulfil valuable moral ideals (or that they endanger these ideals). We would have no reason to redistribute surplus resources, even though they hold no moral value for the holder, if there are no meaningful moral ideals to realize by redistributing those resources or by preventing people from having them.¹¹ Hence, because limitarianism is an instrumental view, the fact that resources lack moral value for the holder does not entail that they are excess resources. We must distinguish the *impermissibility* of holding certain resources from the *lack of moral value for the holder* of certain resources.

Therefore, proponents of ZERO-WEIGHT should explain why the threshold above which additional resources are surplus resources (i.e. resources that do not contribute to the holder's flourishing), which Robeyns refers to as the *riches line*, overlaps with the threshold above which resources are excess resources (i.e. resources that are morally impermissible to possess), which Robeyns refers to as the *limitarian threshold*.¹² Why would the limitarian threshold overlap with the riches line?

The most straightforward answer, I take it, is that the point above which resources lack moral value for the holder is an intuitive and non-arbitrary place to posit an upper limit. Because these resources lack moral value for the holder, there is no basis to claim that one is permitted to keep them when, say, the basic needs of others are unmet. And so, a limitarian threshold that is higher than the riches line seems implausible. It would imply that resources above the riches line lack moral value for the holder but that it is not morally impermissible to possess them, even if we could use these resources to meet unmet urgent needs. Similarly, a limitarian threshold that is *lower* than the riches line does not fit well with the idea that people have weighty reasons to live a fully flourishing life, because this would prevent them from reaching that threshold. Therefore, the most plausible view seems to be that the riches line and the limitarian threshold overlap.

I agree that there is a strong case for advocates of ZERO-WEIGHT to link the limitarian threshold to the riches line. However, they should also take into account other factors when setting the level of the upper limit. That certain resources lack moral value for the holder might constitute an *additional reason* to redistribute such resources. But this reason must complement other reasons for limitarianism, such as that the accumulation of resources in the hands of the few undermines democratic institutions and leaves unmet urgent needs unaddressed. ZERO-WEIGHT gives us an initial level for the upper limit, but that level should be amended depending on the instrumental ideals that limitarianism sets out to promote.

The question of which factors should be considered when determining the level of the upper limit has been raised from the beginning of the debate on limitarianism. Robeyns (2017, pp. 34–37; see also 2022, pp. 260–261; 2023, pp. 7–8), for example, already discussed the possible tension between the democratic argument and the unmet urgent needs argument in relation to the distributive implications of limitarianism. Similar issues have been raised regarding the relationship between

¹¹ I thank a reviewer for this point.

¹² See Robeyns (2022, pp. 5–6). On this point, see also Harel Ben Shahaar (2019).

the flourishing threshold, the needs argument, and the democratic argument.¹³ For example, limits to resources that optimally protect democratic institutions need not overlap with the point above which resources lack moral value for the holder, and the same is true for limits that optimally meet urgent needs. This does not mean that no compelling case can be made for the claim that the riches line should determine the limitarian threshold. But it shows that as an instrumental view, limitarianism might also have to draw on other values to determine the level of the upper limit. The idea that the limitarian threshold and the riches line overlap cannot be taken for granted.

The second reason for why advocates of ZERO-WEIGHT should not take it for granted that the riches line overlaps with the limitarian threshold draws on the problem-driven nature of limitarianism. This relates to the debate about how academic political philosophers can or should theorize about justice and institutional design, and what kind of view one considers limitarianism to be. As a problem-driven view, which is how Robeyns understands it, limitarianism seeks to make a distinct contribution to address real-world-problems. According to Robeyns (2022), limitarians must therefore engage ‘with whatever kind of analysis is needed to create useful knowledge for addressing those problems’ and that the ‘important desideratum is an ability to contribute in a disciplined and ethically sound way to solving problems in the real world’ (p. 4). But this raises the question of whether the riches line is the optimal limitarian threshold. Of course, if we can determine a threshold above which resources lack moral value for the holder, ZERO-WEIGHT contributes to a disciplined and ethically sound way of addressing real-world problems by showing which resources are prime examples of resources that are up for redistribution. However, it does not follow that limitarians should therefore adopt the riches line as their limitarian threshold.

There are at least two reasons for this. First, a study by François et al. (2023) suggests that limits to resources, and to wealth and income in particular, are more likely to raise public support if they address current and specific issues, if they are part of policy packages that address multi-dimensional problems, and if they are relatively high. This last point in particular is relevant for our discussion. They note, for example, that proposals to limit resources made by scholars often draw on much lower upper limits than those raised by political leaders, but that proposals by political leaders are more widely supported. Problem-driven limitarians should therefore examine if the riches line can draw on sufficient public support, which is not self-evident.¹⁴ Importantly, however, even if the riches line would not determine the level of the limitarian threshold, this does not render ZERO-WEIGHT redundant. It could still provide a disciplined and ethically sound case for saying that there is an upper limit to how many resources people can permissibly have.

¹³ See Volacu and Dumitru (2019), Timmer (2019), and Huseby (2022). For a similar discussion in the context of flourishing and Republicanism, see Icardi (2023, pp. 255–262).

¹⁴ For empirical studies on wealth limits and public support, see Davis et al. (2020), Robeyns et al. (2021), and François et al. (2023).

Second, if upper limits are part of a policy package that addresses multi-dimensional problems, we might ask what role ZERO-WEIGHT should play. So far, I have assumed that its role is to determine and justify the level of the upper limit. But its role might also be, or at least primarily, to inform the policy package as a whole. For example, if we accept that it is valuable to reach the limit at which additional resources lack moral value for the holder, part of the overall policy package could be to promote people's ability to reach that threshold, that is, to live a fully flourishing life. However, in that case the limitarian threshold could also be higher than the riches line, for example if such a threshold would be part of an overall package that optimally redistributes (or predistributes) resources, given the moral ideals limitarianism aims to promote.

None of this shows that advocates of ZERO-WEIGHT should *reject* that the riches line overlaps with the limitarian threshold. But they should explain why the threshold above which resources are surplus resources overlaps with the threshold above which resources are excess resources. Given that limitarianism is an instrumental view, and in light of the real-world guidance it hopes to provide, this is not self-evident. The threshold above which additional resources have zero moral value for the holder is not, for that reason, the upper limit above which additional resources are morally impermissible.

OUTWEIGHED

As it is commonly understood, limitarianism assumes ZERO-WEIGHT. It says that there is a threshold above which resources lack moral value for the holder. Some might consider this claim to be necessary for limitarianism: without a threshold above which resources lack moral value for the holder, it may seem impossible to justify limitarianism. Axelsen and Nielsen (2022), for example, say that one might try to 'reject limitarianism by denying that there exists a limit above which money no longer contributes to one's flourishing' (p. 740). However, even if no such threshold can be identified, limitarianism is not without merit. That is, at least, what advocates of OUTWEIGHED would argue. They hold that excess resources are those resources that individuals cannot reasonably claim to be entitled to. People's claim to excess resources are outweighed by other normative concerns.

That someone's claim to additional resources is outweighed by other normative concerns does not mean that they would not benefit from having more resources. It only means that their claim carries too little weight to justify having these resources. This means that limitarian principles might also appeal to those who believe that having more resources would always be better for an individual. Even if this is true, this does not imply that above some threshold having more resources can be justified.

One might believe that ZERO-WEIGHT and OUTWEIGHED are in fact quite similar. For example, Robeyns need not say that no increases in flourishing are possible above the riches line, provided that the increases that are possible do not trigger claims of justice. Robeyns says that her flourishing view

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. (Robeyns 2022, p. 255)

We could, as Robeyns puts it, collectively decide that the moral value of flourishing beyond some threshold is zero.¹⁵ This might simply be a restatement of the claim that above that point, claims to additional resources are outweighed by other normative concerns. If so, Robeyns's flourishing view does not draw on ZERO-WEIGHT but OUTWEIGHED. But this does not fit well with her account of flourishing more generally, which posits an absolute threshold for flourishing that is influenced by many factors, but not by the instrumental reasons limitarianism seeks to promote. (Robeyns 2017, pp. 14–28; for absolute thresholds, see pp. 14–18 in particular)

However, even if this would be a possible interpretation of Robeyns's view, OUTWEIGHED does not require that resources lack moral value for the holder. Even if we collectively decide that additional resources *do* provide morally significant benefits, the marginal value of those resources could be outweighed by the moral ideals that limitarianism instrumentally promotes. For example, allocating scarce resources to unmet urgent needs might be more important than one's ability to accumulate resources above some point. Therefore, limitarianism does not require that additional resources lack moral value for the holder. In fact, it might affirm that such resources have moral value for the holder but maintain that above the upper limit claims to such resources lack sufficient weight.

Importantly, OUTWEIGHED does not entail that it is morally valuable for an individual to reach the upper limit. It is not, as Huseby (2022) puts it, 'an intrinsic sufficientarian value with an upper threshold' (p. 232, fn.13). Consider Robeyns's *democratic argument*, which says that excess resources, and in particular wealth and income, undermine democratic values (Robeyns 2017, pp. 6–10; see also Volacu (2023)). Let us suppose that democratic institutions cannot function properly if some people have more than \$1 billion, and that, therefore, the upper limit is set at \$1 billion. Furthermore, let us suppose that democratic values have lexical priority over economic opportunities. Does this mean that people have weighty non-instrumental reasons to reach this upper limit?

In this example, OUTWEIGHED justifies redistributing billionaires' wealth. This is not because billionaires have 'enough'. It is also not that some people cannot reach this upper limit, nor that billionaires have wealth that lacks moral value to them. Instead, it is because they have 'too much'. They have too much because their fortune upsets democratic values. Put differently, what explains the fact that someone

¹⁵ For example, we might adopt this view as a midlevel principle that can draw on incompletely theorized agreement. See Timmer (2021a, pp. 763–765).

has too much wealth if their wealth upsets democratic values is *excess*. Therefore, *OUTWEIGHED* does not imply that wealth should be redistributed to those with less than \$1 billion *because it brings them closer to having \$1 billion*. The fact that redistributing wealth would bring people closer to that upper limit does not justify such redistribution. *OUTWEIGHED*, then, does not assume that it is valuable to reach the upper limit.

However, one might object that the limitarian notion of ‘excess resources’ plays little role here, apart from singling out the resources that must be given up in order to meet important moral goals. Suppose we have society *A* and society *B*, with the same degree of political inequality between the powerful and powerless in each society. However, only in *A* some people have vast amounts of resources, and these resources are causally related to the inequality in that world. If we are concerned with political equality, *A* and *B* are equally unjust. Any choice for *B* over *A* on the basis that in *A* some people are billionaires would be unmotivated. The choice for *B* would not lead to more political equality. Therefore, the notion of excess plays little role in determining who has too much in this scenario—instead, the values that limitarianism aims to promote explain why we should favour certain states of affairs over others.

To put this point differently, if limitarians accept *OUTWEIGHED*, it is not obvious that a limitarian threshold is needed to promote the morally relevant goals, rather than progressive taxation, equalization, or some other policy.¹⁶ Even if limitarian policies might sometimes be useful, the connection between the intrinsic goals and the instrumental value of limitarianism seems essentially contingent.

These are important points, and I want to make two remarks in response. First, this objection essentially says that because limitarianism is an instrumental view, it must be shown that *limitarianism* rather than some other view best promotes the relevant values. I agree with this. A defence of limitarianism requires a careful examination of which moral ideals it seeks to promote and whether capping resources might be useful. Because the question whether limitarianism is instrumentally valuable in this sense has been discussed extensively elsewhere, I will not say more about this here.¹⁷ But in the section titled ‘[What Should Happen with Excess Resources?](#)’, I address some of the implications of limitarianism for policymaking and institutional design, which touches on how limitarian policies can promote the relevant moral concerns.

Perhaps, however, one holds that the objection that the notion of excess resources plays little role in justifying upper limits applies to *OUTWEIGHED* in particular, but not to *ZERO-WEIGHT*. According to *OUTWEIGHED*, the fact that above some point claims to resources are outweighed by other normative concerns is not explained by a feature of that threshold (e.g. that above that point additional resources lack moral value for the holder). This might make the limitarian threshold in *OUTWEIGHED* somewhat elusive and less robust than it would be under *ZERO-WEIGHT*. For example, the upper limit would shift up and down depending on changes in what it takes to promote the

¹⁶ I thank a reviewer for this raising this objection.

¹⁷ See the references in the Introduction, and especially Huseby (2022) and Robeyns (2022).

relevant moral ideals. But there is no clear and stable level that we can point to when setting the upper limit to how many resources people can permissibly have, such as the point at which someone can live a fully flourishing life. This seems to give ZERO-WEIGHT an advantage over OUTWEIGHED when determining the level of the limitarian threshold.

I agree that because OUTWEIGHED does not posit a clear threshold, this worry applies *more* to OUTWEIGHED than to ZERO-WEIGHT. However, a version of the objection that the notion of excess resources plays little role in justifying the upper limit also applies to ZERO-WEIGHT. As I argued in the previous section, ‘ZERO-WEIGHT’, even if we know that above some threshold resources lack moral value for the holder, we cannot conclude that it is *therefore* morally impermissible to have such resources. This is because limitarianism is an instrumental view rather than an intrinsic view. Advocates of ZERO-WEIGHT must explain why the threshold above which resources lack moral value for the holder overlaps with the threshold above which it is impermissible to have more resources. But this means that even for ZERO-WEIGHT the justification of the upper limit fundamentally depends on the moral ideals that limitarianism seeks to promote, not on the notion of flourishing as such. As I mentioned above, whether or not this undermines the rationale for limitarianism in distributive justice is a topic of extensive debate in the literature. But it is not a problem that is exclusive to OUTWEIGHED, though it might pose a bigger challenge for this view.

Second, the distinction between OUTWEIGHED and ZERO-WEIGHT concerns the conceptual structure of limitarianism; it concerns how we can best understand limitarianism and which commitments come with saying that there is an upper limit to how many resources people can permissibly have. With that in mind, I consider OUTWEIGHED to be an important alternative to ZERO-WEIGHT in understanding the nature of excess resources. OUTWEIGHED could be adopted even by those who reject that above some threshold resources lack moral value for the holder. And it could be adopted even by those who reject that it is morally valuable for an individual (or for the overall distribution) to reach a specific threshold or upper limit. I consider this to be an important advantage over ZERO-WEIGHT, even though it might make determining the exact level of the threshold a more difficult task.

To summarize, limitarians can make two claims about the nature of excess resources and about how the limitarian upper limit should be determined. According to ZERO-WEIGHT, surplus resources have zero moral value for the holder. Proponents of this view must explain why surplus resources, and their accompanying riches line, should determine the level of the limitarian threshold. According to OUTWEIGHED, claims to excess resources are outweighed by other normative concern(s). This view does not depend on flourishing or some other satiable value that denotes when additional resources lack moral value for the holder. Instead, it relies on the idea that above some point, one’s claim to additional resources can no longer be justified all-things-considered.

What Should Happen with Excess Resources?

So far, I have examined what it means for resources to be excess resources. One important further question for limitarianism is what should happen with excess resources. There is an insightful parallel between upper limits and minimal thresholds on this issue. Regarding minimal thresholds, for instance, some hold that we should ensure that as few people as possible are below that threshold. Or should we, say, give priority to those furthest away from the minimal threshold?¹⁸ Similar questions apply to limitarian upper limits. Should limitarians care about the *number of people* who have excess resources, about the *quantity of resources* above the upper limit, or about something else? And what does this mean for the implications of limitarianism in institutional design?¹⁹

Limitarians can have three views about what should happen with excess resources. First, they can aim to minimize the number of people who have excess resources. If so, a world in which a few people possess vast amounts of excess resources is preferable to a world in which many people have some but not many excess resources. Second, they can aim to minimize the total amount of excess resources. In that case, a world in which more people are above the upper limit but only just above it is preferable to a world in which fewer people are above that limit but those who are above the limit are well above it. Third, they can aim to strike a balance between these two aims and seek to minimize both the number of people who possess excess resources and the total amount of excess resources.

These are the views limitarians might have on this issue. But this does not tell us which view limitarians should have. Recall that limitarianism is an *instrumental* view. What should happen with excess resources depends on the values limitarianism aims to promote. For example, even though excess resources are impermissible to have, limitarians need not limit the amount of impermissibly held resources (or the number of people possessing them) at all costs. This depends on incentive effects, for example, and on the impact of specific distributions above the threshold on the moral values limitarianism aims to promote. If capping resources means that much fewer resources would be up for redistribution, this is an important factor to consider. However, what the claim that excess resources are morally impermissible to possess does mean, is that those holding them have no valid claim to keep them. Limitarianism is indifferent to their claim to resources above the upper limit when deciding what should happen with excess resources (with the exception that risks may have to be distributed fairly above that threshold, see the section titled ‘[The Distribution of Risk Above the Upper Limit](#)’).

Having said this, we can assess more concrete implications of limitarianism. On what Robeyns (2017) labels the ‘orthodox’ interpretation of the view, limitarianism proposes ‘a 100% top marginal tax rate above the riches line’ (p. 36).

¹⁸ For discussion, see Shields (2012, pp. 103–104; 2017, pp. 92–97) and Timmer (2021b, pp. 435–439; 2023b, pp. 497–498).

¹⁹ I assume here that limitarianism applies to institutions. However, it might also guide individual action. For discussion, see Berkey (2022).

This is the most radical and direct implementation of an upper limit to resources. Robeyns's discussion focuses on wealth limits in particular, in which case orthodox limitarianism implies taxing away all wealth above some threshold. However, as Robeyns (2017, pp. 35–37; 2019, pp. 261–262) already points out, and as Volacu and Dumitru (2019) have gone on to criticize, orthodox limitarianism seems to fit rather uncomfortably with at least some of the moral ideals limitarianism sets out to promote. For example, if we are concerned with meeting unmet urgent needs, the best way to allocate excess resources is by allocating them in such a way that we can optimally meet those needs. But for this purpose, progressive taxation above the upper limit might be more apt than orthodox limitarianism. For that reason, Volacu and Dumitru (2019, pp. 258–262) propose *weak limitarianism*, which seeks to enact revenue-maximizing tax policies above the upper limit (coupled with a responsibility constraint) rather than enforcing strict limits.

The difference between orthodox and weak limitarianism can be illustrated by comparing the implications of the democratic argument and the needs argument on the question of how to allocate excess resources. For the needs argument, excess resources are *wasted resources*. They are wasted because they could be of much more value, morally speaking, if redistributed. But according to the democratic argument, the problem with excess resources is not that they are wasted resources but that they are *dangerous resources*—they undermine democratic institutions. For that reason, the needs argument might be more tolerant when it comes to possessing excess resources, provided that they do, at least indirectly, promote meeting urgent needs (e.g. via some version of trickling-down). But the democratic argument will be less tolerant regarding such resources because their very existence threatens democratic institutions.

Once we realize this, it becomes clear that orthodox limitarianism and weak limitarianism are not the only possible limitarian policies and stances towards excess resources. Both orthodox and weak limitarianism are versions of what I have elsewhere labelled 'redistributive limitarian policies', which draw on redistributive policies to reallocate excess resources (Timmer 2019, pp. 1334–1335). They target the resources that people have appropriated above the upper limit. Consider the needs argument. According to that argument, excess resources should be used to address unmet urgent needs. Limitarianism would then say that because there are unmet urgent needs, it is impermissible to have resources above the upper limit (Robeyns 2017, pp. 10–14; 2022, p. 255). But of course, that cannot be all that limitarianism says. It would be wrong, for example, to spill or simply burn excess resources (assuming this would even be possible), because doing so does not address the issue of unmet urgent needs. Following that line of thought, we could say that it would be equally wrong to minimize the number of people with excess resources if the most effective and efficient way to meet unmet urgent needs would be to minimize the total amount of excess resources. If limitarianism is concerned with meeting unmet urgent needs, redistributive limitarian policies can help promote the moral ideals limitarianism sets out to promote.

However, rather than adopting redistributive policies, limitarians could also adopt 'predistributive limitarian policies', which aim to limit excess resources by manipulating initial holdings (e.g. via inheritance taxes) (Timmer 2019, pp. 1334–1335).

Consider the democratic argument: limitarianism's stance towards excess resources depends on what would alleviate political inequalities. In addressing such inequalities, the aim of limitarianism need not be to lower the number of people holding excess resources or to lower the total amount of excess resources directly. Instead, its aim could be predistributive in nature, namely to create and uphold structures in which it is unlikely that people will possess such resources in the first place, thereby protecting democratic institutions (or, for example, the social basis for self-respect (Neuhäuser 2023)). Whether such predistributive policies resonate with the needs argument depends on whether they would help in meeting urgent needs, not via proposing revenue-maximizing limitarian redistributive policies, but by proposing predistributive measures instead.

The Distribution of Risk Above the Upper Limit

I want to make one final comment on what should happen with excess resources, which applies to ZERO-WEIGHT in particular. I have argued that limitarians who endorse ZERO-WEIGHT hold that resources below the riches line have moral value for the holder (for Robeyns, for example, this is because they contribute to flourishing). Let us assume that the riches line overlaps with the limitarian threshold.²⁰ If so, limitarians who endorse ZERO-WEIGHT must be concerned with what happens to people holding excess resources when thinking about institutional design. More specifically, they should be concerned with the distribution of risk among those above the riches line.

To see this, consider the following analogy. Some philosophers hold that sufficientarianism, which holds that people should have enough of some distributive good, is objectionably indifferent between distributive policies above that minimal threshold (Temkin 2003, pp. 65–66; Casal 2007, pp. 307–308, 311–312, 315–316). On a crude version of sufficientarianism, once everyone has enough, there is no reason to favour progressive taxation over regressive taxation. This is because such sufficientarianism denies that distributive criteria apply above the minimal threshold. However, even if no distributive criteria apply above the minimal threshold, we cannot be *entirely* indifferent about what happens above that threshold. This is because there is always the *risk* of someone falling below the minimal threshold, and such risks constitute a threat to sufficiency (Kanschik 2015). For that reason, sufficientarianism might favour burdening those well above the minimal threshold over those just above that threshold because those just above that threshold run a higher risk of falling below it. And this is true even for sufficientarians who believe that no distributive criteria apply above the threshold.

Similarly, limitarians who endorse ZERO-WEIGHT must hold that being just above the riches line is riskier than being well above it. This is because for those close to the threshold, there is a greater chance of falling below it. Sufficientarians might, for that reason, allocate resources above the threshold so that the risk

²⁰ If the thresholds do not overlap, this argument applies to the distribution of risk above the riches line.

of someone falling below it is minimized. All else equal, this calls for progressive taxation above the minimal threshold because that lowers the risk of people falling below the threshold. Likewise, advocates of ZERO-WEIGHT might say that excess resources should be redistributed in such a way that the risk of preventing people to live a fully flourishing life is minimized (or another standard, if one adopts a different metric). This is because, unlike advocates of OUTWEIGHED, they say that it is valuable to reach the upper limit. In the case of limitarianism, this favours limitarian policies that optimally promote the moral ideals limitarianism sets out to promote, favouring policies that factor in people's respective risks of falling below the riches line. This is because those just above the riches line run a greater risk of being unable to live a fully flourishing life than those well above it, even if all people above the riches line are *currently* living a fully flourishing life (or, again, have some other high standard of living). If limitarians endorse ZERO-WEIGHT, then, they should be concerned with the distribution of risk above the riches line when deciding what should happen with excess resources.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to examine limitarianism by focusing on its upper limit. According to limitarianism, it is morally impermissible to have excess resources, which are resources above the upper limit. ZERO-WEIGHT maintains that excess resources (or more specifically, surplus resources) have zero moral value for the holder. Alternatively, OUTWEIGHED maintains that excess resources have moral value for the holder but that their claim to such resources is outweighed by other normative concerns. Both interpretations entail that if redistributing resources could help alleviate unmet urgent needs and strengthen democratic institutions, having excess resources is morally impermissible.

Moreover, I argued that, depending on the values limitarianism seeks to promote, limitarians should care about the number of people with excess resources, the total amount of excess resources, or both, that they can adopt redistributive measures and/or predistributive measures, and that versions of limitarianism that endorse ZERO-WEIGHT should be concerned with the distribution of risk above the upper limit. In doing so, I hope to have clarified some of the commitments that come with defending limitarianism and its upper limit to resources.

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