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Limitarianism and future generations

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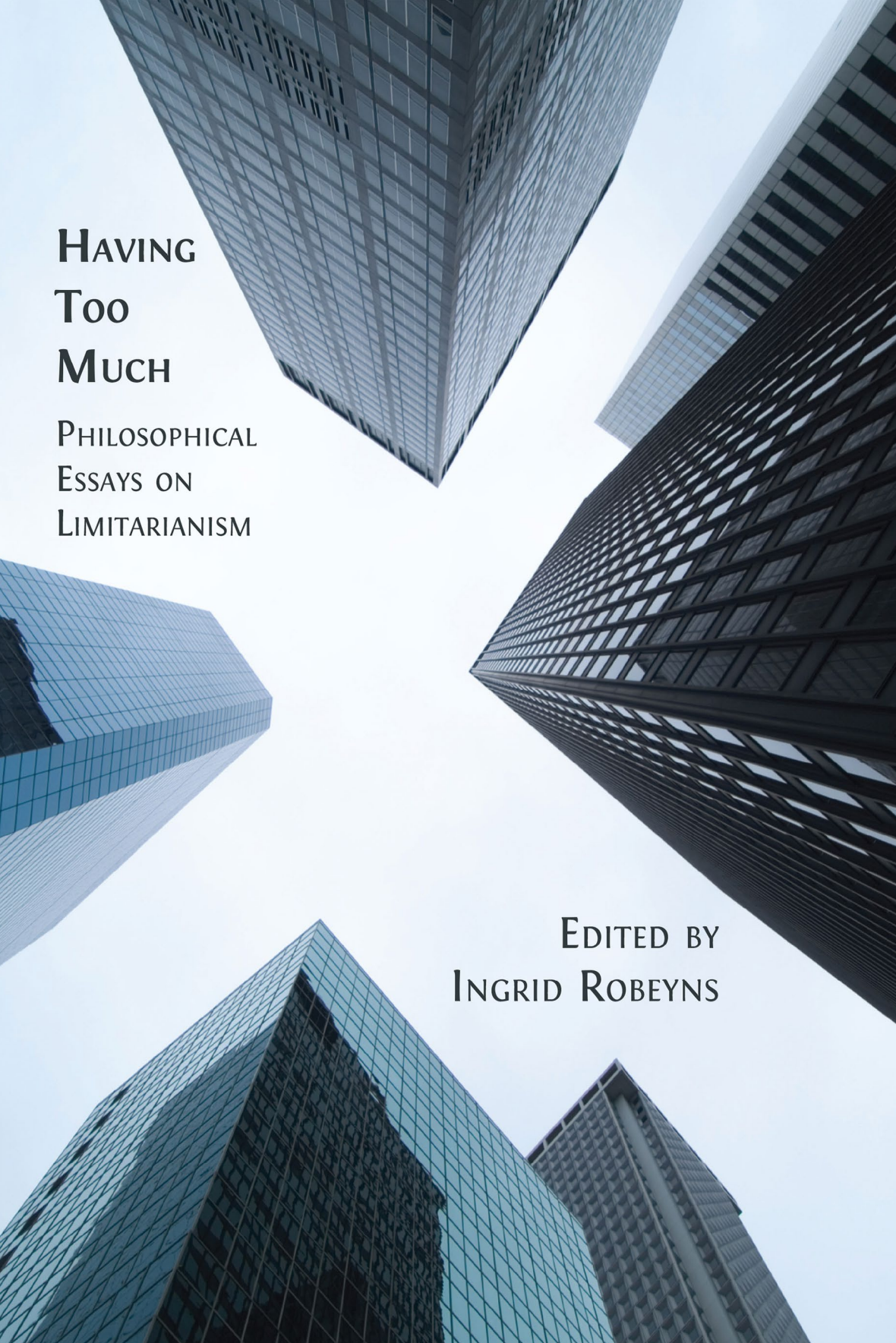
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A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several modern skyscrapers with glass facades, converging towards the top of the frame against a pale sky. The perspective creates a sense of height and scale.

HAVING Too MUCH

PHILOSOPHICAL
ESSAYS ON
LIMITARIANISM

EDITED BY
INGRID ROBEYNS



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14. Limitarianism and Future Generations

Tim Meijers

1. Introduction

The idea of too much, of limits, is central to understanding the practically most pressing intergenerational issues. Limitarianism—the idea that it is bad or unjust to have too much—seems like a natural fit. We drive and fly too much. We eat too much meat and dairy. We buy too many things. As a result, we emit too much CO₂ and other greenhouse gases. We—collectively—take up too much ecological space. This chapter asks what the merits and constraints of a limitarian view are in the intergenerational context.

Given the kind of theory that limitarianism is—non-ideal¹ and partial—we should not expect it to provide us with a full-blown theory of intergenerational justice. The goal of this chapter is primarily explorative: it asks what opportunities and challenges limitarianism faces, and sketches the contours of what intergenerational limitarianism could, and should, look like. Given that some of the most pressing challenges we face today have an intergenerational dimension, it makes sense to ask two questions about limitarianism.

First, we might want to ask whether intergenerational concerns bolster the case for limitarianism. Do concerns about intergenerational justice give us additional reasons to embrace limitarianism? Second, we could

¹ But see Herzog (forthcoming), Icardi (in this volume) and Neuhäuser (in this volume) about limitarianism in ideal theory.

ask whether bringing in concerns for future generations can help us develop a limitarianism that fits the most pressing intergenerational challenges with which we are faced. These two questions guide this paper. The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I very briefly introduce the most prominent version of limitarianism, economic limitarianism (Section 2). Next, I argue that the main arguments for limitarianism have considerable intergenerational traction. However, it also raises questions about what principle of allocation limitarians would have to endorse (Section 3). Section 4 argues that if we want limitarianism to cover environmental justice and environmental limits, limitarianism needs to be revised, it cannot just be about money or individual holdings. But these revisions would come at considerable theoretical cost for limitarianism. Perhaps we should not expect this from limitarianism to begin with. The last section before the conclusion, somewhat speculatively, proposes a Rawls-inspired defense of an intergenerational limitarianism.

Introducing Economic Limitarianism

This section offers a brief outline of the key features of economic limitarianism. Limitarianism is the view that it is unjust (or bad) if people are very rich. Nobody should have wealth above a certain line, the limitarian threshold. The key arguments against having too much are twofold. First, large distributive inequalities threaten democratic equality (because money comes with power and can corrupt politics). Second, because the money could do more good elsewhere, i.e., tackling global poverty, disadvantage or collective action problems.

There are several ways to identify the limitarian threshold. First, one may argue that there is something like a riches line, above which more money brings nothing of moral value to those who hold it. In other words, at some point, more wealth does nothing for our objective wellbeing (although we might like to have more). The riches line assumes satiability, a limit to our capacity to convert cash into objective wellbeing. Suppose someone has fortune F of which amount N is above the riches line; taking away amount $N-1$ (dollars, euros, whatever) would not set their interest back in any morally significant way (although they may not like it). One could argue that the limitarian threshold coincides with the riches line: people should not have wealth in excess of the riches line.

One may also defend a limitarian threshold independently of the riches line (and independently of whether one thinks such a line does in fact exist). Such a threshold could be defined in absolute terms, or—given the positional nature of many justice-relevant goods—in relative terms: whether one counts as ‘too rich’ depends on how much others have (see Ben Shahrar 2019; Timmer 2021b).

Economic limitarianism is about *money*, or at least about assets whose value can be expressed in monetary terms. The very rich should give away their surplus wealth, or should have it taxed, or we should move to an economic system in which they will never become so rich. Economic limitarianism is about the holdings of individuals, not the holdings of a state, a generation, or a business. A larger unit of analysis is suggested by Robeyns in her initial formulation of the view, i.e., the family, but even in that case it is the per capita holdings of the family that matter.² It can only be *a person in particular* who has too much. The reason is clear: if we look at average per capita holdings we skip over the fact that different members of the group may hold different amounts. They may on average have too much while individual members may have too little, if the assets are concentrated in the hands of a subset of members.³

Limitarianism, by focusing on the rich, shifts attention from the beneficiaries of redistribution to those who will pay for it. It is contributor focused (for beneficiary-related reasons). Finally, economic limitarianism is a partial and non-ideal theory of justice. We should not expect limitarianism to provide a full theory of distributive justice, but rather it is a part of a larger picture that concerns what we owe to each

2 The family-level analysis comes up in the context of the fertility objection. Robeyns (2017) asks whether, when determining if a family has holdings above the riches line, we should consider whether they have children or not. She argues that we should consider this because some children have morally relevant interests of their own that might be set back by distribution. So, the riches line for a family with four members would lie higher than for a family of two.

3 This is how limitarianism has been formulated so far. Of course, one may be concerned about the wealth concentrated in the ‘hands’ of large corporations, and the limitarian concerns we have about this may not be reduceable to the concerns we have about this wealth being (indirectly) in the hands of the shareholders of this corporation. Similarly, one may be concerned about the wealth of certain states on the global level, allowing for inequalities in both power and affluence in the face of poverty, in ways that are not reduceable to concerns about the holdings of individual citizens of that state: the power of money to corrupt the political process is not tied to it being held by natural persons.

other. It is supposed to be action-guiding, a rallying flag, to move the world in the right direction. Although it does not provide a picture of what a just society would look like, it points to something necessarily absent in any appealing picture of a just society: great abundance in the hands of a few in the face of deprivation. The actions and policies it recommends are not (if the threshold is high) very demanding. The upside is that it does not require consensus on what justice requires exactly. Limitarianism is theoretically light. People holding all sorts of views may agree with the following: if we must reallocate money to advance important universally supported goals, it is preferable to do so at the cost of those who have a tremendous amount of wealth. They will lose nothing, or very little. People holding very different views of justice may agree that imposing a limitarian threshold is a move in the right direction.

Economic Limitarianism and Future Generations

Current discussions about limitarianism have a limited temporal focus. Those defending limitarianism look at the wealth *currently* held by the extremely wealthy, and mostly at *current* social ills that could be addressed through an alternative distribution.⁴ This section explores the intergenerational aspects of economic limitarianism. I focus here on justice between birth cohorts (overlapping or not), not justice between age groups (the old and the young).⁵ Do we have reasons, from the point of view of intergenerational justice, to support economic limitarianism? I will look at the intergenerational implications of the two main arguments of limitarianism separately, because they are arguments of a different nature, they may have divergent implications and different thresholds may result (e.g., Robeyns 2017, p. 36).

Does this question get things the wrong way around? Should we not first ask what the implications of intergenerational limitarianism are?

4 The exception being the ecological argument that Robeyns (2018) develops. Although the argument is clearly relevant to future generations, it is primarily about the fair distributions of the costs of sustainability intragenerationally. Holland (forthcoming) defends a limitarian-adjacent view.

5 Whether limitarianism has a role to play in questions about age-group justice is an interesting question, but not one I will explore here. For some remarks on this issue, see Manuel Sa Valente (2022).

That is how one would proceed with other theories of intergenerational justice. We would not ask whether equality *now* would be good for future people, but whether egalitarian principles apply across generations. Should we not ask whether limitarianism has intergenerational implications, and then test whether those implications meet with some deeply held moral convictions? This kind of objection misses the point. Limitarianism is not meant to be a theory of justice but rather a partial commitment, perhaps best seen as a mid-level principle that we have reasons to embrace in non-ideal circumstances. If we have reasons to be limitarians, we have reasons to do so because of prior moral commitments.⁶ Limitarianism can play a function as a rallying flag, because the central tenets are supported by a wide variety of more substantive moral views. Justice comes first and limitarianism comes second. If one endorses a limitarian principle, one does so for reasons of justice (or other moral considerations): because democratic equality matters, because unmet needs are unjust, and so on. So, do we have reasons relating to intergenerational justice to support economic limitarianism?

The Democratic Argument and Future People

The first argument for limits to wealth focuses on the effects of extreme wealth on democratic equality. Robeyns (2017) drawing on e.g. Christiano (2012), argues that people who are extremely wealthy can (and do) spend large sums of money on influencing the political process at little to no cost to themselves. They can do so by making donations to political parties and lobbying organizations, and attempting to influence voters, and so on. This is a threat to democracy. In a democratic society, citizens should have a roughly equal say (or at least a roughly equal opportunity to have a say). Extreme wealth threatens this. And for liberal theorists democratic equality is of paramount importance and takes priority over economic considerations (e.g., Rawls 1971).

6 For a critique suggesting that this renders limitarianism superfluous, see Huseby (2022), Robeyns (2022), and Timmer (this volume) for a response. Timmer (2021a) proposes other ways to think about limitarianism: as a presumption, a mid-level principle or—more practically—as policy limitarianism.

Limits to wealth would reduce inequalities in power resulting from inequalities in wealth. Depending on whether one embraces the riches line or a relative limitarian threshold, billionaires lose nothing or at least very little in terms of flourishing if we take their surplus wealth away.⁷ Given that limitarianism significantly advances democratic equality at a very low moral cost, this is an easy choice to make. Does the democratic argument have traction in an intergenerational setting? At first sight, democratic equality plays a limited role between us and future people. We do not vote in the same elections and are not straightforwardly members of the same demos. Although we certainly exercise power over future generations, this is because of the unidirectionality of time. The fact that we have power over future generations in ways that they do not have power over us is inevitable.

Political power, and with it, democratic equality, is a positional good. What matters is how much power you can yield in comparison to relevant others. The value of my share of political power depends in part on the amount of political power that others exercise. But it is only in relation to those who yield political power in the same setting that concerns about democratic equality apply. The fact that Julius Caesar held a horrific amount of political power compared to his contemporaries does nothing for my equal standing as a Dutch citizen. One has to share a polity, in some sense, for questions of democratic equality to arise. One may think that what matters from the point of view of democratic equality is that those who live together at a particular time in a particular society yield approximately similar amounts of political power. If this is right, the temporal scope of the democratic argument is limited. Democratic equality at first sight matters synchronically, not diachronically⁸ (at least between non-overlapping generations).

The literature on the democratic argument for limitarianism has said very little about what exactly is bad about democratic inequality. This makes sense, for a non-ideal view: most people agree that democratic equality is of paramount importance. This is enough for a non-ideal theory to garner support. But it is helpful for our purposes

7 It is conceivable that if one embraces a limitarian threshold that is highly responsive to circumstances, the limitarian threshold could be quite low. The result would be that limitarianism is quite demanding.

8 At least between non-overlapping generations, see Sa Valente (2022).

here to say a bit more about this question. We can distinguish between instrumental and intrinsic arguments for democracy or the value of democratic equality. First, we may think that democratic inequalities are intrinsically bad: it is wrong if some people have greater opportunities for political influence than others. One may think that democratic legitimacy requires that everybody who is subject to a law should be in some sense a co-author of that law. This is independent of the content of the law decided upon. Even if unequal political influence would have led to a better decision by some objective standard, that decision would be problematic from the point of view of democratic legitimacy. Second, one may think that democratic inequality is bad because it leads to bad or unjust decisions. This is an instrumental concern about democratic inequality: democratic inequalities are bad because—and insofar as—they lead to bad laws and policy. This may be for epistemic reasons (perhaps we missed perspectives of marginalized groups) or for moral reasons (excluding some that skewed the decision, disadvantaging the marginalized). Laws may be less effective, or less just (or both).

The instrumental argument has clear traction in the intergenerational setting: if a democratically equal society makes (morally or epistemically) better decisions regarding future generations, there are instrumental reasons to protect democratic equality. Decisions taken now affect future people. If the rich lobby for deregulation, for example in the domain of fossil fuels, this will adversely impact future generations. In this sense, the existence of extreme wealth *anywhere* at *any time* could be a threat to democratic equality *everywhere* now and in the future, because it gives those with a lot of wealth the opportunity to eschew decision-making in their favour. So, we can conclude the following:

Future consequences of current decisions: Insofar as large inequalities create (an increased risk of) decisions which threaten the rights (or morally significant interests) of future generations, we have intergenerational reasons to support limitarianism.

On instrumental grounds, insofar as democratic inequalities result in bad decisions for future people—or have a larger risk of doing so than alternative distributions—there are reasons to constrain the influence of the very wealthy. Whether the condition holds is an empirical question, but there are some reasons to think that it does. One reason

for thinking that a more equal society would be better for future generations is that egalitarian societies historically tend to be more adaptive in the face of crises.⁹ Another reason (or symptomatic of the previous reason) is that plenty of very wealthy individuals actively oppose the regulation of harmful industries, oppose taxes which would benefit the least advantaged, and actively distort scientific discourse. One may reasonably think we would have done better, and could do better, in the face of the challenges created by climate change without decades of funding for climate denialists and misinformation that has been partially spearheaded by hard-headed opposition from industry.¹⁰ But money can work in several directions, and it is not inconceivable that billionaires would—and some do—put their money behind good causes.¹¹ However, we should not want to be dependent on the goodwill of the rich to spend their money in a particular way.¹² The very fact that they *may* act in tremendously damaging ways, one may think, is enough reason to make sure that they cannot. From the limitarian perspective there is no need to take a gamble if we can make sure instead that wealth is put to good use by taking it away.

What about the intrinsic argument? Future people may nominally live in the same polity as us, but we are not taking decisions together. Future Dutch people live in the Netherlands like me, but we do not make decisions together. Future people do not exist (by definition), so they cannot vote.¹³ The positionality concern does not seem to apply between us and future people.

This does not mean that intrinsic concerns are entirely mute. Even if wealth inequalities between the currently extremely wealthy individuals and future individuals are not a direct concern, extreme wealth *in the future* may be a threat to *future democratic equality*. Rawls argues that intergenerational justice requires that we pass on stable just institutions to future generations (Rawls 1971, section 44). Although

9 See, for example, Van Bavel, Curtis & Soens (2018).

10 There are too many examples to list, from lobbying to misinformation, fake action groups, and so on. One striking example is that “Exxon knew of climate change in 1981, email says—but it funded deniers for 27 more years”, <https://theguardian.com/environment/2015/jul/08/exxon-climate-change-1981-denier-funding>

11 An example of a billionaire who did so is of course Bill Gates.

12 See worries about philanthropy by Reich (2018) for republican arguments of this kind, and Icardi (this volume).

13 One may think that, on all-affected grounds, future people should have a say in current decisions that affect them. For a critical discussion see Heyward (2008).

arguably Rawls's theory of intergenerational justice is not sufficiently demanding (e.g., Gaspart & Gosseries 2007), certainly this is a part of what we owe future people. Passing on just institutions to future generations requires us to pass on institutions in which future people can live as democratic equals. This is the *entrenchment of democratic inequality* argument for limitarianism: inequalities today persist in the future, undermining a future society of equals.

Wealth tends to accumulate intergenerationally. Large fortunes can often be traced far back in time, and rich families are able to hoard opportunities for their own members.¹⁴ Intergenerational accumulation of wealth might deepen and entrench inequalities. But even if there was a way to break the intergenerational chain of dynastic wealth, for example through high inheritance taxation, transferring a society with large inequalities undermines the capacity of future citizens to live as democratic equals. Limiting extreme wealth today, dynastically or by changing an economic system that otherwise enables large inequalities, would limit inequalities of wealth in the future. And given the connection between wealth and political influence, this would undercut future democratic inequality. If we owe future generations democratic equality, we owe it to future generations to transfer to them a society without extreme wealth.

Future synchronic inequalities. It matters that members of future generations can relate to each other as equals within their generation. Insofar as not limiting economic inequalities now entrenches or even increases democratic inequality in the future, we have reasons of intergenerational justice to embrace limitarianism.

On intrinsic grounds, we have reasons to make sure that there is less extreme wealth in the future, because it threatens just democratic institutions in the future. This bolsters the case for limitarianism.

The Argument from Unmet Needs

The second argument for limitarianism is the argument from unmet needs (Robeyns 2017). The argument here does not appeal to inequality but rather to the good that could be done with surplus money. The billionaire loses nothing of significance (or very little if one embraces

14 E.g., Barone & Mocetti (2021); Clark & Cummins (2015).

a relative threshold) if they lose their surplus wealth. But if it is used well, others have a lot to gain. Surplus wealth could do more good in the hands of those who have the least, because it could address unmet needs, for example basic needs like food, housing and schooling. Again, at first sight this argument is focused on the currently wealthy, and the currently badly off. But one can cash out the unmet needs argument in intergenerational terms. We need to prevent deficits in the future (see, for example, Caney 2010), and for this we need resources. Due to climate change, resource depletion, and so on, future people may find that the meeting of their basic needs is in jeopardy. This can partly be prevented through mitigation and adaptation, but this requires significant investment.

Can we extend the scope of the unmet needs argument to include future generations? One concern is that future basic needs are not the same as current basic needs. Even if we bracket challenges about the moral status of the members of future generations and the resulting difficulties of talking about the needs of and harms to future people, the case of future generations raises difficulties (see Meijers 2018). We can determine with relative certainty whether actions we take now would help someone to meet their basic needs. But the future, especially if we think about the longer term, is uncertain. There is a likelihood that bad outcomes will materialize, and we do not know for whom they will materialize. The fact that we are dealing with probabilities may be a reason to discount the interests of future generations. Future suffering *may* happen, whereas current suffering *does* occur. Meeting unmet needs now may have to take priority over possible, or even likely, unmet needs in the future.

One way forward is to point out that limitarianism does not purport to be a complete theory. Assigning differential weight to several possible destinations for surplus wealth is not a question limitarianism has to answer. We simply have reasons to address *both* types of unmet needs. It is not up to limitarianism as such to say what—if anything—matters more. This can only be part of an answer. Although the interests of current and future generations are very often aligned (rightly emphasized, for example, in the UN Sustainable Development Goals), this is not always the case. First, there may not be enough surplus

wealth to do both, given the magnitude of current and future concerns.¹⁵ Limitarianism, as a view that is focused on where to *get* the money to address injustice, tells us little about how it should be spent. Yet quite a bit is at stake here. The basic needs argument justifies limitarianism on (mostly) forward-looking consequentialist terms: limits bring about a more desirable outcome. This *presupposes* a view about what a better outcome looks like.

Perhaps, pursuing the consequentialist tendency of the argument from unmet needs, we should *maximize* the impact of the way we spend the money. We make sure that more basic needs are met and that more people flourish who are currently not flourishing. Without a discount rate on future people's wellbeing, another classic problem in intergenerational ethics arises. Unless a major disaster arises, there will be many more future people than current people (e.g., Rawls 1971, pp. 286–287). Hence, future-oriented measures may be more efficient than measures aimed at addressing poverty today, simply because we (current people) are outnumbered. Moreover, if 'one takes the size of the population as variable, and postulates a high marginal productivity of capital and a very distant time horizon, maximizing total utility may lead to an excessive rate of accumulation (at least in the near future)' (Rawls 1971, p. 286). The upshot of following the consequentialist logic of imposing limits on a principle of allocation, unless one could justify assigning less moral weight to future people, may very well be that the future is prioritized over the present (see also Lippert-Rasmussen 2012).

Given the concerns at the heart of the limitarian project, it seems unlikely that limitarians would embrace an impersonal form of consequentialism. Such views assign importance to there being more people with positive welfare. They do not just assign value to future people doing well; but also assign value to there being future people (and to the fact that there will be more of them rather than fewer). Limitarians tend to care about making peoples' lives go well, not about having more people with good lives. Whether a limitarian view is resourcist, welfarist, or capabilitarian, limitarianism emphasizes

15 By embracing a limit that is lower or more flexible than the riches line, this challenge may be avoided. For example, if the height of the line was responsive to the amount of unmet basic needs, or if the threshold was relative (e.g., an intragenerational version of the idea suggested by Ben Shahar (2019)).

person-affecting reasons because it takes existing injustices as a starting point.¹⁶

But even if one embraces a person-affecting view which includes the members of future generations, if future people have equal moral weight, the implication that we should prioritize the future follows. We—currently existing people—are outnumbered. This may be a problematic conclusion, although some embrace it. Instead of limitarianism being a rallying sign for people who want to address the worst injustices in the world that exist now, we would end up with a future-focused position that was no longer primarily concerned with the needs of current generations. The upshot of these considerations is that it is hard to tell whether intergenerational limitarianism is an attractive view unless we know the kind of principle of allocation with which it is combined. Saying “limitarianism is only a partial view.”¹⁷ Let’s agree about limitarianism first, and talk about how to spend the money later” is not an option. If limitarianism is (partially) justified on consequentialist grounds, we need to know how to distinguish better and worse outcomes in order to decide whether we should be limitarians at all.

There is one more straightforward, contingent way in which limits to wealth could benefit future generations. The super-rich are particularly bad for the environment. Take Taylor Swift, whose private jet was used 170 times between July 2021 and July 2022.¹⁸ Regardless of who was on board (Swift or people she allowed to use her plane), it is quite likely that, although having and operating a private plane is extremely expensive, buying it and using it did not require significant sacrifice. Had she not been extremely wealthy, she would not have been able to afford a private jet. Having fewer extremely wealthy people would be a good way to limit needlessly polluting consumption, creating less unmet needs in the future.

16 Limitarians would probably embrace a consequentialist allocation principle, but it is unlikely to be the kind of allocation principle that is embraced, for example, by long-termist effective-altruists of the utilitarian persuasion (or the policy variant thereof).

17 Robeyns (2022) sees limitarianism as a partial view, a building block for a larger theory of justice. My worry here is that we cannot judge the plausibility of limitarianism without knowing which theory of justice it is a part of.

18 www.guardian.com/music/2022/aug/02/taylor-swift-private-jet-carbon-emissions-blattantly-incorrent.

The rich have the means to behave in ways that harm the planet that people without large amounts of money simply lack, and they can do this at no significant cost to themselves. It is not just that the rich have money to spend on frivolous things; extreme wealth also encourages such acts. Among the rich, there is competition concerning status. Take private yachts, for example.¹⁹ Even if one grants that a yacht could bring something of value, there is a point at which a bigger and fancier yacht does not make owning or using it better. What seems to drive a push for ever larger and more extravagant boats is that the relative size of the boat matters in relation to experiencing the status that comes with having such a boat. But objective wellbeing is not improved when one billionaire out-boats another billionaire, although it may matter tremendously in subjective terms. With less surplus wealth, the competition concerning status is suppressed: it is much more costly to liberate resources to engage in such pointless and wasteful competition.²⁰

If reducing the number of high rollers would reduce the amount of luxury emissions, and this will benefit future generations in morally relevant ways, we'd have an additional reason to support limitarianism.²¹ The environmental impact of limiting wealth may not be insignificant—after all, 10% of the world's population produces 50% of all CO₂ emissions (Oxfam 2020). Whether or not taxing wealth would advance the sustainability goals would depend on what happened to the surplus money next. There is not a perfect correlation between money and emissions, but one may think that at least in our current circumstances the result would be net-positive. This is important to emphasize: this unmet needs argument for limitarianism is much more contingent

19 There is a category of status goods that makes me pause. The very rich may 'buy' status by providing large amounts of funding for goals they consider worthwhile. For example, named donations made to performing arts organizations, or having a building—library, university building, hospital wing—named after oneself. Not all status-driven expenses are frivolous. If the donating billionaire truly loves opera or libraries, there is a way in which her interest is set back in morally relevant ways if she can no longer support worthwhile goals. They advance the objective wellbeing of others with these donations, although not optimally.

20 This problem holds in all social classes, and affects all sorts of status goods. I think it should be uncontroversial that most status goods that billionaires spend their wealth on do not advance their objective wellbeing, but it is more difficult to determine this for those who are not extremely wealthy. See e.g., Axelsen and Nielsen (2022, p. 744).

21 See also Koch & Buch-Hansen (2020).

than the democratic counterpart. In a world where, for example, the billionaire class invested in nature reserves or the development of green technology, the calculus might have a different result.

This gives us an additional reason to think about a principle of allocation. Surplus money may do more harm to future people than good if allocated in the wrong way, even if it does contribute to the lives of those currently badly off. Limitarianism tells us where to take money and which general direction to send it in. But it does not, as such, specify how trade-offs in the allocation need to be dealt with. In a carbon-heavy economy, allowing more people to consume might increase emissions, pollution, and depletion. The interests of the currently badly off and future generations may not be completely aligned and may even significantly diverge. The intergenerational case shows, in a particularly stark manner, that for limitarianism to be plausible it needs a view about what happens at the bottom, not just about what happens at the top.

To know whether taxing the wealthy does indeed lead to better outcomes for future people, we need to know two things. First, we need to know what the rich do with their money and what the recipients will do with it. If (unrealistically) all billionaires become green fanatics and promote sustainability and poorer recipients start eating meat, burning more coal or buying cars, we do not have intergenerational reasons to embrace limitarianism (even if it would in fact make the life of the worst-off better). Second, we need to know how to weigh different possible destinations of surplus wealth. This is theoretically more pressing.

Allocation objection: we cannot judge the implications of the argument from unmet needs in the intergenerational sphere without a principle of allocation.

One of the reasons limitarianism is appealing is that it is theoretically light. It has a relatively thin set of substantive commitments. If limitarianism cannot do without an allocation principle, a view of what makes an alternative distribution *better* and when it is better, it needs stronger and possibly more controversial commitments, which could make it lose some of its ecumenical potential. Note that this concern applies only to the argument from basic needs. The argument from democratic equality is not affected.

How could limitarians respond to the allocation objection? When confronted with more destinations for surplus wealth than available

surplus wealth, limitarians have two options. First, they could propose a rule of allocation under scarcity. This would require a stance on which type of concerns get priority. For example, uncertainty about the future should factor in when we weigh how much we owe to future generations. Or perhaps our duties to our contemporaries are more demanding because we have stronger associative duties to them, or for epistemic reasons we are better placed to help them. Or perhaps we owe future generations *less* due to a morally relevant difference between our contemporaries and future people.

Second, one could propose lower, more flexible wealth thresholds.²² One may think that given the pressing circumstances we find ourselves in environmentally speaking, we should take much more from the rich than just their surplus wealth. With more to distribute, tensions are less likely to become unsurmountable. In her discussion of the ecological argument, Robeyns (2018) justifies taking surplus wealth for climate purposes quite extensively. Whereas the argument from unmet needs appeals solely to the consequences of distribution, Robeyns defends limits on these grounds partially for backward-looking reasons. She argues that because the rich are responsible for emissions and because they benefit the most from emissions, they have an additional *special* responsibility. It is fair that they take on the largest share of environmental duties, which partially encapsulate our duties to future generations.

This argument lays the foundations for another response: perhaps we should embrace the idea that we have good reasons to let those who pollute too much pay for the environmental transition, *even* if it pushes them below the riches line. Chris Neuhäuser points to this idea in the context of climate change when he says: “Those who within rich countries count as simply well-to-do, clearly turn out to be rich in morally problematic ways in the global context.” (Neuhäuser 2018, p. 187, my translation).

The latter answer comes at some cost for limitarianism. It no longer appeals to surplus wealth alone. Principles of responsibility and fairness

22 Icardi (this volume) also makes this point: if limitarianism appeals to the fact that the interests of those with unmet needs simply outweigh the interests of the very wealthy in holding on to their wealth, the distinctive nature of the view comes under pressure.

would have to do much of the work. Or, if wealth acts as a proxy for responsibility, limitarians would have to embrace a rather low threshold and limitarianism wouldn't be a view about what most people would consider the rich. Earlier I mentioned that the richest 10% of the world emits 50% of emissions, but of course many members of the middle class in richer countries belong to the richest 10%. This strategy does not rule out tragic, interpersonal trade-offs. As the climate crisis becomes more severe, this may increasingly be the case.

Beyond Economic Limitarianism?

Economic limitarianism primarily discusses current social ills. And although environmental issues and climate change are mentioned as possible destinations of surplus money,²³ concerns about future generations are not the starting point. Although economic limitarianism has intergenerational potential, it faces challenges when trying to capture central concerns of intergenerational justice.

The first reason for this is the emphasis on money. Money is not irrelevant when it comes to intergenerational transfers, but it is not the only—or most important—thing. It matters that we transfer enough financial resources to future generations and that we do not leave them, for example, with enormous [foreign] sovereign debt. But a solid financial position cannot compensate for extreme weather, failed harvests, depleted resources, and so on. This is the *ecological sustainability objection*. As Robeyns puts it:

Yet for ecological reasons surely it matters a great deal whether people use their [wealth] to attend yoga classes, buy an SUV, or fly on a regular basis. [My] account of riches doesn't tell us anything about people's ecological footprint. Isn't that a relevant moral consideration when we decide who counts as rich and who doesn't? (Robeyns 2017, p. 28)

Robeyns's reply to this concern is that ecological resources are an analytically distinct issue. We should think of ecological constraints as

23 The concern is mostly about sharing the burden that comes with acting in relation to our environmental duties in a fair way, making the broadest shoulders as well as the polluters (in the real world often the same people, e.g., Shue 2005) carry the burdens.

additional limits: there may be limits to ecological impact, emissions, and so on, as well as to wealth. Yet in the case of intergenerational justice, the basic needs of future generations cannot be seen separately from ecological limits. If future basic needs give rise to economic limitarianism, they give rise to ecological limitarianism as well. They are entangled and the ecological limits are more fundamental. It is conceivable to have very wealthy individuals who sit well above the flourishing line, but if they invest their money in solar panels, gardens for bees, and the development of sustainable technology, extreme wealth is not a concern from the point of view of intergenerational justice. And people well below the riches line may be a serious threat if they spend their limited resources in the wrong way. Money-only limitarianism would be isolationist (focus on only one thing among others that matter) and seems unable to capture those things that matter most from an intergenerational perspective.

I have already pointed to the fact the redistribution in a carbon-reliant economy could lead to increased overall emissions, creating a possible clash between the interests of current and future people. If the scope of the basic needs argument is intergenerational, the link between ecological and financial limits is stronger than it seems at first sight. We could divert surplus money to solving large collective action problems with clear relevance for future generations, converting cash into sustainability. But this cannot be the full story. It may very well be that, even without too much money, people will emit too much, consume too much, and pollute too much. And sharing the burden of collective action problems fairly is an intragenerational issue even though it concerns investments which will benefit, among others, future generations (e.g., Robeyns 2017).

Limitarians will share these concerns. Concerns about needs, wellbeing, and the capacity to lead a good life are central to the argument from basic needs. Money is simply a proxy. And we should only rely on a proxy if the proxy is reliable. In the intergenerational setting, money is not the right way to measure—not the right metric—what we really care about from the point of view of justice. The first move for a more complete picture of intergenerational limits would be to move away from this proxy and to focus on ecological limits. If we follow the template of money limitarianism, we need to ask whether

there is something like surplus emissions, surplus pollution, and so on, understood as emissions and pollution which have little to no value to the polluters or the emitters. This line may be harder to draw than in the case of money. If I can get to work by bike or by car and both options are equally good, it is clear that my interest is not significantly set back by not using the car. But it is not true that driving the car to work would have no value to me. This suggests another kind of threshold: we should not ask whether the extra emission or pollution leads to an improvement in terms of additional wellbeing, but whether the pollution or emission is necessary for an improvement in terms of objective wellbeing.²⁴ Perhaps we do not need a threshold as stringent as this. Breena Holland, who defends capability ceilings, proposes a different, softer kind of threshold which results from weighing interests. She writes that “limiting activities that are of low importance and high per capacity emissions would do the most to maximize the freedom of both present and future people” (Holland forthcoming, p. 15). The limit would, in this case, become something more flexible aimed at balancing the interests of future and current people.

An ecological limitarianism would provide a part of the solution to the allocation problem faced by economic limitarianism. It would allow us to order priorities when deciding where to allocate surplus money so as to take the environmental impact of wealth into account directly. Concerns about basic needs go beyond money. For limitarianism to play a central role in theorizing intergenerational justice, it would have to embrace the ‘Not just money’ claim: intergenerational limitarianism cannot be just, or even primarily, about money.

The second reason why economic limitarianism falls short as a view on intergenerational justice is its focus on individual limits.²⁵ But from the point of view of sustainability, this is not the only thing that matters; we need to think about whether humanity as a whole acts sustainably. This suggests the idea that collective rather than individual limits are what matter. We may still violate collective limits even if nobody in particular is engaged in surplus emissions, pollution, or consumption.

24 See E.g., Shue (1993) on luxury and subsistence emissions.

25 See also Hickey (2021) for an elaborate discussion of lower individual limits derived from planetary limits and Green (2021) for the different roles ecological thresholds play.

Collective limits may be much lower than the aggregation of individual limits, understood as consumption that does not contribute significantly to objective wellbeing.²⁶ This, again, points to the need for a more demanding version of limitarianism which places collective thresholds over individual ones. One would have to embrace the idea that collective limits are prior to individual limits: collective limits take precedence and determine the limits within which individual limits have to be set.

What about situations in which there is enough for everybody without exceeding the collective limit? At that point, is there no longer a role for generational limits? One may think that as soon as we pass on enough to future people, current people can do whatever they want with the surplus. This is what the principle of sufficiency, in its traditional or conservative interpretation, allows. We are permitted to use more than enough providing we are not depriving any other present or future individual of enough, even if our doing so upsets intra- or intergenerational equality. On this view, while equality may have force when so many lack enough, once all have enough there is no justification for insisting on an egalitarian distribution. Paula Casal has proposed a different interpretation of sufficiency, which she terms Conservationist Sufficiency. On this interpretation, universal sufficiency does not undermine the case for equality, but instead undermines the case for further environmental destruction. Once we have enough, we may continue to use resources harmlessly or sustainably but have, perhaps defeasible, but still very powerful reasons not to cause further environmental destruction, at least until sufficient conservation has been secured.²⁷ One reason for this is that the future is very uncertain, and if avoiding insufficiency is very important, avoiding the risk of insufficiency is very important too. On a reasonable interpretation of the precautionary principle, a limit is required even in circumstances

26 This suggests another kind of limit: if both the total and the per capita matter, should we think about limits to population, too? Part of the historical precedent of some form of limitarianism is the work of Thomas Malthus, who links the idea of having (collectively) too many children with individuals falling below the sufficiency threshold. One does not have to be a Malthusian to endorse the idea that some demographic developments are problematic from the point of view of justice, even if one should be hesitant to talk about 'surplus' people for obvious reasons. For a discussion on limits to demographic growth, see Meijers (2017).

27 Minimizing risks of future insufficiency is one of the many reasons for 'Conservationist sufficiency' given by Casal (draft).

of relative abundance. If using more ecological resources does not significantly improve the position of the current generations (except perhaps by allowing them to engage in frivolous preferences), it is better to transfer a planet with a larger rather than a smaller carrying capacity. We do not know what kind of circumstances future people will be confronted with, and if our lives are already good enough, perhaps we lack the permission to use more in ways that do not benefit future generations. This version of sufficiency and some version of limitarianism that stresses the need to reduce consumption, may have similar implications.

A version of intergenerational limitarianism—collective limits, focused on natural resources and carrying capacity, embracing a precautionary principle—may offer an appealing view of our intergenerational duties. But it strays considerably from economic limitarianism. It may no longer be recognizable as a version of it. It is much more demanding and requires a much larger degree of theoretical and political agreement. It will resemble a view of (intergenerational) fair distributive shares more generally. But we already have such views (in which limits play a significant role). This raises questions about the purpose of a view like limitarianism: a move to include ecological concerns (not just money, collective limits) may come at the cost of the distinct role of limitarianism to the literature on distributive justice.

Limits and Constraints on Intergenerational Transfers?

So far, the focus has been on limits on the current generation: how much they can own and how much they can use. But limits could play another role, too: limits on how much we should transfer to future generations. From an egalitarian perspective, Gaspart and Gosseries (2007) argue that Rawlsian egalitarians should consider generational savings (transferring more than is received) unfair. This is because the savings could also be used to benefit the least well-off within a particular generation. On this view, equality would be the intergenerational limit due to the maximum allocation rule.

Rawls's view on intergenerational justice is usually interpreted as an institutional form of sufficientarianism, but some of the arguments offered have limitarian potential. Rawls (1971, §44) embraces the just

savings principle, which entails that our duties to future people are satiable: at some point we have done enough. This point occurs when just institutions persist stably over time (and, plausibly, their natural preconditions) (Meijers 2017). We have to save, and transfer more than we have received, until we are at that point. After that, the duty to save disappears. Rawls writes about this steady state, saying that “the last stage at which saving is called for is not one of great abundance” and that “it is a mistake to believe that a just and good society must wait upon a high material standard of life” (Rawls 1971, p. 290). What this emphasizes is that duties to future generations are capped (unlike, for Rawls, duties of justice among contemporaries). The level of the cap is not particularly high: we do not owe future generations extremely high standards of life. No great abundance, no high material standard of life. So far, so sufficientarian. There are duties up to a certain level, but no duties above it. Rawls goes on to express a limitarian position next, though:

What men want is meaningful work in free association with others, these associations regulate relations to one another within a framework of just basic institutions. To achieve this state of things great wealth is not necessary. In fact, beyond some point it is more likely to be a positive hindrance, a meaningless distraction at best if not a temptation to indulgence and emptiness (Rawls 1971, p. 290).

There are two claims here. First, what makes life go well does not come from ‘great wealth’ but from self-realization (it is no coincidence that this sentiment returns in the discussion of the Aristotelian Principle: see Rawls 1971, §65). The second claim goes beyond this: not only do we not need great wealth, but it is also an obstacle. Nothing is gained by engaging in greater material consumption; on the contrary, great wealth might be a hindrance.

This second claim has a limitarian ring: there is a point at which more wealth has no additional value. But it is limitarianism of a radical kind. Wealth may be *bad* for those who have it. And this may be true not only for the very rich; it is conceivable that many have *too much*. This passage is not easily dismissed as an anomaly in Rawls. Over thirty years later, he expressed a very similar sentiment in a letter to Philippe van Parijs, talking about the EU:

The large open market including all of Europe is the aim of the large banks and the capitalist business class whose main goal is simply larger profit. The idea of economic growth, onwards and upwards, with no specific end in sight, fits this class perfectly. If they speak about distribution, it is [al]most always in terms of trickle down. The long-term result of this—which we already have in the United States—is a civil society awash in a meaningless consumerism of some kind. I can't believe that that is what you want (Rawls & Van Parijs 2003).

This is perhaps the most striking anti-capitalist anti-growth statement from Rawls we have on public record, but it is consistent with his position from *A Theory of Justice* up to his last writings. We're not interested here in Rawls's 'true' position; the question is whether such a limitarianism makes sense and, if it does, what it implies.²⁸ This second quote helps us make sense of the previous one. Why would more *wealth* be bad? This becomes clearer if we do not understand more wealth in terms of a better life. It is about economic growth and what is done with the resulting money: engaging in *meaningless consumerism* or spending it on a very high *material* standard of life. Growth 'onwards and upwards' is bad if it is growth in terms of wealth understood as material wealth. What I take to be Rawls's limitarian claim here is that it is wrong to transfer the kind of society in which consumption and growth are treated as central to the good life, *even* if these high consumptive standards can be met. It is about the kind of society that we leave behind, and it being conducive to future people being able to lead good lives and not inheriting a society obsessed with GDP growth or consumption.

At first sight, this appeal to the more perfectionist, Aristotelian, elements in Rawls's work brings to mind perfectionist, or 'intrinsic', forms of limitarianism, for example as developed by Danielle Zwarthoed, although at a societal level and possibly with a lower threshold.²⁹ I want to suggest—I admit somewhat tentatively here—that there are not impermissibly perfectionist reasons to embrace a position like this. Importantly, the limitarianism that Rawls's quote suggests is one of economic growth and levels of consumption, not of all kinds of transfers. Transferring more knowledge, more ways to cure diseases,

28 See Gaspart & Gosseries (2007), Attas (2009), and Meijers (2017) for close readings of Rawls.

29 Zwarthoed (2018), as well as Aristotle, as discussed by Kramm and Robeyns (2020).

more natural beauty, or biodiversity or a more resilient climate are clearly not ruled out: we may give future generations *more* in this sense. The concern about ‘meaningless consumerism’ does not apply to these kinds of concerns. It does not forbid increasing or enriching the valuable opportunities of future people.³⁰

Transferring a society obsessed with growth and consumption could be thought to be wrong for two reasons. First, the capacity to formulate, revise and pursue reasonable and rational plans in life is crucial for liberal theories. A liberal theory of justice does not tell us what our plan should be, but protects our capacity to formulate and pursue the plan that we ourselves reflectively endorse. This entails having responsibility for our ends: we have the responsibility to formulate plans which fit our fair share. It would be unreasonable, even if the plan itself were not irrational, to pursue a plan which would require others to sacrifice their plans for mine. If there are planetary ecological limits, we have reasons to adjust our plans in life to these limits. Transferring a set of values to future people which emphasizes consumption and economic growth while this is incompatible with the limits of justice places future generations in a difficult spot. We are basically transferring irrational values to future people, if these values inform plans in life that cannot be realized with one’s intergenerational fair share. Although future generations might be able to come to terms with the limits, it will come at a considerable cost—having to revise their plans—to them. Although the concern here is about living within one’s fair share, it aligns our plans with planetary limits, as discussed in the previous section. This is clearly a non-perfectionist reason, but the reasons for it are contingent.

Second, note the reference to indulgence, emptiness, and a lifestyle “awash in meaninglessness” in Rawls. This suggests a second wrong: transferring a society which imprints meaningless plans on to its members, and harms our (and future peoples’) capacity to lead meaningful lives. This is a deeper concern, and, if legitimate, would hold

30 Rawls thinks many of the most important things in life are not primarily fueled by consumption. In the context of the rationality of conceptions of the good and the Aristotelian principle he writes: “thus the familiar values of personal affection and friendship, meaningful work and social cooperation, the pursuit of knowledge and the fashioning and contemplation of beautiful objects, are not only prominent in our rational plans but they can for the most part be advanced in a manner which justice permits.” (Rawls 1971, p. 425).

even if consumerism were not likely to lead to intergenerational wrongs. Even if, through a technological miracle, we were able to lift the entire global population to current levels of consumption and beyond, there are reasons to hesitate. This sounds perfectionist: the good life consists of meaningful activities, not of empty consumption. But at the very least it is not *more* perfectionist than keeping current views in place, which emphasize material consumption. Such a society also leaves very little room for other plans in life: even if one chose it, all the alternatives come at considerable costs. If such a culture does indeed hinder people who are attempting to pursue rational plans in life, for example because they will be engaged in endless competition for status with other citizen-consumers instead of pursuing an actual conception of the good, we can say a bit more: moving away from a culture which makes rather meaningless activities central (and the default) does not hinder people's capacity to lead meaningful lives. If they decide that the materialist life is the life for them after all, they should be allowed to pursue it within the bounds of justice (just as the grass-counter can count grass (Rawls 1971, p. 432) however pointless). But it should not be the norm.

One way to think about what we owe to future generations in this context is in terms of the kinds of plans in life our societies set as a default. De-emphasize the consumptive resource-intensive activities and emphasize others. One upshot of this is that the kinds of limits discussed in Section 4 will not *feel* like impossible limits to meet, or less so. To someone who conceives of the good life as one of consumption, living within the limits of intergenerational justice is hard, almost impossible. We could aim to internalize the limits that intergenerational justice requires us to respect, formulate plans in life, and pursue them, in an ecologically light fashion. This does not need to be a worse life (see footnote 31). If consumerism is indeed a meaningless distraction, it may even be better. It does not need to be a monkish life that is devoid of pleasure. Rejecting ever-increasing consumption does not entail the rejection of growth in terms of flourishing or wellbeing.

In the section about economic limitarianism I have discussed the entrenchment of democratic inequality. But these are not the only things which are passed down intergenerationally as a result of extreme wealth. Money *today* influences and shapes the kind of ideas and ideologies that persist through time. This may be done by wealthy individuals funding think-tanks, or by large corporations or industries. An example would be

the success of the automotive industry in making their product central to our ways of life, often at the detriment of public transport, livable cities, and the environment. Large fortunes with strong stakes in the continuation of our current way of life may, and do, put their fortunes behind maintaining our focus on consumption. Wealth now may sustain ideas, norms and values that are harmful to future people, as Rawls too suggests in his letter to Van Parijs about large banks and the capitalist business class pushing for a certain view of what Europe should be. The kinds of limit we can read into Rawls's view on intergenerational justice tie up with concerns about democratic equality; we should be concerned about how current wealth—held by individuals, but also by corporations—shape not just the present but also the future. And this is not just a consequentialist concern, since one may also be concerned about the fact that the rich have such a disproportionate amount of influence over what the future of our societies and planet look like.³¹

Although a limit of this kind focuses on changing the way people formulate their plans in life, it is primarily about societal change. It is not just about the individual not using more than their fair share, but about creating the kind of society in which people freely formulate less resource-intensive plans in life. This involves more than changing individual behaviour; it also involves changing how we treat each other, how we organize ourselves politically and socially, how we design our physical environment, and so on. It would help to reconcile us—as well as future generations—to the limits with which we are faced. It may improve our capacity to lead meaningful lives. Perhaps we owe future generations a society which limits growth.³²

The limitarianism suggested here ties different concerns raised in this paper together, and has something to say about the currently rich, environmental limits and what kind of society we should leave behind. It strays considerably from limitarianism as originally formulated, and is considerably more demanding and theoretically less light. The ideal may be appealing, but whether we should present it under the heading

31 I thank Paula Casal for insisting on this point. I cannot do full justice to her suggestion here, much more needs to be said about the ability of current wealth to shape the future materially and ideologically.

32 Much more needs to be said about the kind of limitarianism hinted at here: whether it is indeed a *liberal* theory, whether it stands as a theory of Rawls, and how it relates to adjacent fields like de-growth economics and rethinking of the terms of prosperity, etc.

of limitarianism depends on what limitarianism is supposed to be about. The ideal presented here, however, does stay true to one of the core limitarian ideas, emphasizing the idea of too much wealth.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the prospects of limitarianism in debates about intergenerational justice. Bringing in the intergenerational perspective bolsters the case for limitarianism, but it also raises significant challenges. The democratic argument has considerable traction intergenerationally: if we owe future generations democratic institutions, we cannot transfer a society to them that is very unequal. The argument from unmet needs, too, has intergenerational traction. But it points to an important issue going forward: questions about allocation. We cannot really come to terms with the implications of limitarianism if we do not know what happens to surplus wealth: whose hands it ends up in, what they do with it, and what good it would have done elsewhere.

Although economic limitarianism has traction in the intergenerational domain, it seems ill-equipped to tackle crucial questions concerning intergenerational justice. Due to its focus on money and on individual limits, it seems unable to arrive at a minimally plausible view of intergenerational justice. Tailoring limitarianism to fit the demands of intergenerational justice would result in a more demanding and theoretically more controversial view. Moreover, that view would likely move in the direction of existing theories of distributive justice. An important question is what conclusion one should draw for limitarianism from this. Perhaps the upshot is that limitarianism as a political ideal is suitable to tackle a limited set of questions, related to extreme economic wealth, only. Going beyond this, I have suggested somewhat speculatively a Rawlsian view of intergenerational limitarianism. Such a view—about which more needs to be said—goes some way to bringing environmental considerations in under the heading of a form of economic limitarianism, reconciling reasonable limits on our environmental impact with the threat this poses to our ability to pursue our plans in life.

The concerns I have voiced about limitarianism have an overarching theme. Limitarianism is—in part—appealing because it is theoretically,

morally and politically light, due to its focus on those who have the most and its appeals to social wrongs which are generally uncontroversial. Very few people are, at least openly, opposed to meeting basic needs or protecting democratic equality and it is not particularly demanding. It is a view which would in principle be able to garner broad support. But principles of (intergenerational) allocation or settling on limits to protect the needs of future people come with heavier theoretical commitments, damaging the broad support for the view. This is a broader concern, reflected in the current debate about limitarianism. A more ambitious limitarianism—lower wealth thresholds, or relative thresholds, as many propose—may be better able to capture grave injustices but risks losing broad support as well as morphing limitarianism into existing distributive views. 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.

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