

Envy, Levelling-Down, and Harrison Bergeron Defending Limitarianism from Three Common Objections

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ENVY, LEVELLING-DOWN, AND HARRISON BERGERON¹

DEFENDING LIMITARIANISM AGAINST THREE COMMON OBJECTIONS

Abstract

This paper discusses limitarianism in light of three popular objections to the redistribution of extreme wealth: (i) that such redistribution legitimizes envy, which is a morally objectionable attitude; (ii) that it disincentivizes the wealthy to invest and work, leading to a diminished social product, and, thereby, making everyone worse-off; and (iii) that it undercuts the pursuit and achievement of human excellence by depriving successful people of resources through which they may otherwise excel. We argue that these objections fail to undermine limitarianism. An elaborated defence against them, rather, reveals how the Standard Defence of limitarianism may be expanded and strengthened by relying explicitly on the importance of preventing a society of envy, avoiding harm to non-rich citizens, and ensuring that humans are given the opportunities to excel in ways that go beyond those that allow for the amassment of wealth.

Keywords: Limitarianism; Extreme wealth; Distributive justice; Robeyns.

Introduction

For decades, the number of extremely wealthy people and the magnitude of their wealth has been increasing rapidly. This has led politicians in several countries to propose wealth or “billionaire” taxes. This political response to the growth of extreme wealth has recently been provided with a theoretical counterpart under the label of *limitarianism* (Robeyns 2016). Limitarianism, as proposed by Ingrid Robeyns, is the view that *it is not morally permissible to have more resources than needed to live a fully flourishing life*—in other words, it is impermissible to be extremely wealthy or to “be above the riches line” (Robeyns 2016; 2019). Traditionally, principles of distributive justice focus on *inequality*, setting out when and why it is unjust when people face different opportunities or outcomes (Dworkin 2000; Cohen 2009). Alternatively, theorists of distributive justice focus on *insufficiency*, arguing that injustices arise when people do not have *enough* (Nussbaum 2000; Crisp 2003; Shields 2016). Extreme wealth, of course, would be considered a problem by both types of principles since it both is an expression of (radical) inequality and, arguably,

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is unjust because it is held where some have too little. Why, then, should we include a principle targeting extreme wealth specifically?

The reasons for why we should do so is captured in what we might call *The Standard Defence* of limitarianism.

The Standard Defence: people who are extremely wealthy have “*surplus money*”—money that do not contribute to their flourishing. Since this money does not contribute to their flourishing, it is *distinctively* unjust to leave it in their possession, when it could instead be used to meet unmet urgent needs or alleviate significant political inequalities.

Robeyns focuses on arguments based on two types of claims that conflict with the claims of the rich to retain their wealth. Both are present in our contemporary context: the existence of unmet urgent needs and the presence of significant political inequalities. Their presence, she argues, renders surplus money morally impermissible. In this article, we aim to bolster the limitarian defence, broadening its defence beyond these two arguments. We do so through a discussion of three popular objections to the confiscation of the resources of the extremely wealthy.

First, *the envy objection* argues that targeted confiscation of extreme wealth and the notion that such wealth is mere surplus money is grounded in morally objectionable feelings of envy. Such motivations, however, do not constitute a reasonable basis for claims for redistribution.²

Second, *the levelling-down objection*, rather than focusing on motivations, targets the state of affairs, which results from extreme wealth confiscation, arguing that this situation is worse for the superrich and better for no one (indeed, it might even make everyone worse off).³ Allowing the wealthy to keep their surplus money, according

² See, for example, this response to the proposed Labour wealth tax, dismissing it as “the politics of envy” (Watt and Malik 2021). See also the response in the *National Review* to the proposed wealth tax in the US (Tuttle 2016). For a theoretical version, see Frankfurt (1987).

³ See, for example, this article in the *Financial Times*, arguing that wealth taxation has little net benefit for society, and may even make everyone worse off (Greene 2019). For a theoretical version of this argument, see Parfit (1997).

to this objection, enables *others* to flourish by creating incentives for innovation and initiative, making more resources available for everyone.

Finally, *the Harrison Bergeron objection* is named after the Kurt Vonnegut short story, depicting a society in which the beautiful are made to wear masks, the strong carry lead weights, and the intelligent have their thoughts interrupted by disturbing noises sent through an implant in their ear. The objection holds that by disincentivizing individuals from fulfilling their potential, extreme wealth confiscation holds back and undercuts human achievement, excellence, and pre-eminence in the name of making everyone equal.⁴

By focusing on objections raised in popular political discourse, we zoom in on reasons people actually employ against policies that target extreme wealth. Our project is not, then, an attempt to probe the philosophical foundation of limitarianism directly. First and foremost, it is a philosophical exploration of prominent real-world objections to the limitarian core ideas of surplus money and wealth confiscation and a discussion of ways in which limitarianism can be defended against them. We see this project as being of particular importance because, whereas limitarian policies are compatible with a wide range of philosophical theories—egalitarianism, sufficientarianism, utilitarianism, prioritarianism, etc.—its policy recommendations do not hold much mainstream appeal. In targeting real-world political objections head on, we aim to develop arguments that are theoretically sound but speak to actual political circumstances. In doing so, we seek to align our ideas with the aspirations of other theorists who classify limitarianism as an instance of “non-ideal” or “mid-level” theorizing that is pertinent to problems faced by actual political societies (Robeyns 2022; Timmer 2021).

In this article, we argue that the three objections fail to undermine limitarianism. They do, however, prompt us to bolster the case for why keeping surplus money is unjust in ways that go beyond the two arguments proposed by Robeyns. The three objections, it turns out, rests upon three mistakes and dispelling these mistakes can help strengthen the case for limitarianism. First, societies with extreme wealth

⁴ See, for example, this article in the National Review, arguing that left-wing policies of redistribution and affirmative action “weaken” or “handicap” individuals and societies (Williamson 2015). For the “theoretical” version, see Rothbard (2000).

develop and sustain accelerated levels of status competition. As such, rather than being motivated by envy, the confiscation of extreme wealth is necessary to *avoid* the proliferation and systematization of social envy. Second, rather than being good for others or, at least, not bad for others, the abundance of the extremely wealthy is, in important ways, *harmful* to others and to society, making them insufficiently well off. Finally, we show a concern for human excellence should lead us to commend, rather than condemn, the limitarian project.

Before turning to this view, we will flesh out the different components, starting with the Standard Defence, followed by the three main objections, the assumptions upon which they rest, and how these assumptions are mistaken.

Billionaire taxes and Limitarianism

Limitarianism starts from the same intuition as the targeted billionaire tax proposals of Labour in the UK and Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren in the US; that there is something morally repugnant and politically shameful about the existence and increase in the number of superrich individuals. As mentioned, this proposal has recently been underpinned theoretically in the form of limitarianism.

The core idea of limitarianism can be defended either with *instrumental* arguments, claiming that extreme wealth is unjust because of its unexploited potential for rectifying other significant injustices through redistribution (Robeyns 2016; Volacu & Dumitru), or by *intrinsic* arguments, such as by saying that extreme wealth makes wealthy people cultivate and embody problematic vices like greed, arrogance, or closed-mindedness (Zwarthoed 2018). The two strands of argument are compatible—it is possible to accept both instrumental and intrinsic arguments for limitarianism. For our purposes, however, the distinction is less relevant, because, in responding to real-world objections to limitarian policy, we need to take seriously the foundational assumptions of the objections in question and, thus, we must be open to both instrumental and intrinsic reasoning. On all accounts, however, limitarianism implies that the confiscation of money above a certain threshold does not cause a shortfall in flourishing. Thus, wealth above this line carries no moral weight, and represents “surplus money”, which it would not be unjustified to tax away entirely. Limitarianism, then, takes its name from the idea that there exists

some *limit*, above which having resources is morally objectionable—and below which, it is not. Robeyns refers to this as the *riches line* (Robeyns 2016: 16).

Limitarianism is explicitly not a complete theory, or free-standing principle, of distributive justice—just like Labour’s “billionaire tax” is not their only redistributive policy. If it were, it would have the implication that any distribution below the riches line would be just—as long as no one is too rich. This would include distributions, in which most lived in severe poverty and a few people lived just below the limit of maximal flourishing. This is plainly absurd. Hence, neither policies nor principles targeting extreme wealth should be considered in isolation. Rather, limitarianism should be understood as a specific “mid-level” moral and political prescription narrowly concerned with one real-world political problem, and compatible with numerous, more foundational, moral and distributive theories. This also means that a billionaire tax is merely one possible policy available to limitarians to reach their desired distributive outcome (Timmer 2018).

The Standard Limitarian Defence is comprised of two distinct claims. *The flourishing claim* states that money above a certain threshold does not contribute to a person’s flourishing. The more tangible political upshot of limitarianism, however, comes from *the injustice claim*, which states that withholding surplus money in the face of conflicting claims is distinctively unjust (or, more strongly, that surplus money has *zero* moral weight). One might reject limitarianism by denying that there exists a limit above which money no longer contributes to one’s flourishing—that is, by denying the flourishing claim. For the purpose of this paper, we will set this question aside and focus only on the injustice claim, which we seek to bolster and elaborate upon. Below, we present three objections to the Standard Defence and show how a closer inspection of these objections can help bolster the injustice claim and, thereby, limitarianism.

The Envy Objection

The envy objection suggests that when a wealth tax is proposed, the underlying motive is that the non-wealthy *covet* the abundance of those that are wealthy; their mansions, their yachts, and their private golf courses—and such motivations are not legitimate grounds for making claims on others and should not be afforded political

recognition. The envy objection, in other words, says that redistribution of wealth embodies the problematically other-regarding sentiment of envy. As theorists have noted in other contexts, envy is a morally objectionable motivation for redistribution. Envy is malicious, firstly, because, “the envious stake their sense of well-being on another’s deprivation” (Anderson 2010: 8). The envious, in this way, perceives the fortune of others as an injury to their self and to their interests.⁵ Moreover, envy distracts and alienates people from what should be the focus of their attention: their own life pursuits. In the words of Harry Frankfurt, such motivations tend “to divert a person's attention away from endeavoring to discover [...] what he himself really cares about and what will actually satisfy him” (Frankfurt 1987: 23). If limitarian policies are motivated by and legitimize envy of this sort, this seems like a significant issue.

To see how the envy objection might play out in practice, consider the case of Brandy, who owns several pairs of nice shoes. One day at school, however, she meets her friend, Monica, who has just bought a brand-new pair of alligator skin sneakers.⁶ Brandy is envious of Monica’s shoes and feels that, if Monica has the shoes, she *must* have the shoes too.⁷ According to the envy objection, confiscations of extreme wealth are cut from a similar cloth. Thus, tax proposals that specifically target the wealth of the superrich are similarly motivated by an unhealthy fixation with the prosperity of others and acknowledging such proposals politically involves legitimizing this unhealthy fixation. When people seek to prevent the wealthy from buying seaside mansions, expensive cars, and other luxury goods it is because they are envious of their ability to do so, and this jealousy should not be given political recognition.

The envy objection can be interpreted in two different ways. First, it might be conceived as an assertion about the *standing* of those who propose and defend

⁵ In her survey of public opinion on wealth redistribution, Jessen Hansen (2022) finds that support for such redistribution is correlated with feelings of envy towards the rich while resistance to wealth taxation correlates with admiration of the rich.

⁶ The inspiration for this example comes from Frank (2010), 8.

⁷ “I’m sorry that you
Seem to be confused
They belong to me
The shoes are mine”
We might imagine her saying

limitarian policies. Because such individuals are motivated by improper feelings of other-regarding envy, this interpretation holds, their claims are invalidated. On this *motivational interpretation*, envious motives undercut one's standing as a claimant, which renders claims one makes illegitimate. Actors need to meet certain conditions for their proposals to be considered. Being motivated by envy, supporters of limitarian policies fail to meet these conditions—similarly to how criminal court cases may be dismissed if, say, procedures regarding interrogation or arrest have not been followed.

Second, the envy objection might be understood as targeting the morally objectionable nature of envy, rather than how it affects one's standing as a claimant. On this second *moral interpretation*, the issue stems from politically recognizing and, thereby, encouraging envy which distracts people from their own projects and is problematically other-regarding. While the motivational interpretation challenges the standing of those motivated by envy, the moral interpretation decries the presence and legitimization of envy as a morally objectionable sentiment.⁸

Let us, first, consider the motivational interpretation, on which envy is an illegitimate motivation for political claims, which undercuts the standing of the claimant. It is worth making some observations about how a limitarian might respond to this interpretation of the objection. Such a response might begin by objecting that being motivated by envy does *not*, necessarily, invalidate political proposals. Ronald Dworkin, for example, has argued that envy, properly construed, is the appropriate response to unfair inequalities and that a just societal distribution should, thus, be “envy-free” (Dworkin 2000). In other words, under circumstances of unfairness, not only does envy *not* undermine the standing of the claimant; it is the appropriate sentiment to invoke in such situations—similarly to how outrage is the appropriate sentiment to invoke under circumstances of radical injustice. This invites us to draw a distinction between justified and unjustified envy. Egalitarians, such as Dworkin, hold that justified envy is the appropriate response to unjust inequalities, which can easily be directed towards the extremely wealthy. To the first interpretation of the envy objection, then, limitarians can respond that they *are*

⁸ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for helping us draw this distinction.

motivated by envy—envy that they will never experience a life of such inordinate luxury and endless opportunities. But also that this envy is entirely justified—because the luxurious opulence of the extremely wealthy is unjust, unfair, and undeserved. This first response, of course, might not satisfy those who do not share the egalitarian foundation upon which it is built, and hence not all opponents of the limitarian project will be convinced by it. But it is worth noting that by insisting that extreme wealth is no justified source for envy, these opponents are taking a, not merely inegalitarian, but radically inegalitarian standpoint, which is difficult to defend theoretically.

If we, instead, understand the envy objection along the lines of the moral interpretation, envy is a morally objectionable sentiment. Limitarian policies are motivated by envy. If we take seriously or grant such proposals, therefore, we legitimize, and thereby encourage, these objectionable, problematically other-regarding motivations. Those who raise the envy objection in this form worry about the state institutionalizing envy-motivated proposals, since this sentiment and social relations which are based on it are to be avoided, not aided.

However, on closer inspection, if we wish to avoid a society permeated by envy, it is not obvious that we should target limitarian policies. Indeed, our argument is precisely that we should prevent the accumulation of extreme wealth and undercut great inequalities *because* such distributive circumstances escalate and intensify the competition for status goods, the purchase of luxury goods, and interpersonal envy. Limitarianism, then, prevents, rather than promotes, envy.

How, then, does envy relate to extreme wealth? Well, as Robert Frank discusses in his recent exploration of how peer-pressure influences consumption behaviour, in purchasing bigger houses, fancier cars, and shinier shoes, the wealthy shift the bar for what is considered a normal-sized house or a pair of shoes of a normal level of fanciness (Frank 2020: 29).⁹ Thus, the presence of extreme wealth in societies

⁹ These effects can occur, furthermore, even in cases where the rich deliberately seek to avoid pernicious consequences, as analyzed in Justin Farrell's recent exploration of the trend among the rich to seek a simple and sustainable life in the wilderness. Thus, in appropriating enormous plots of land and constructing spacious mansions, from where they can experience wild nature, Farrell argues, they are causing massive increases in real estate prices,

accelerates and propagates competition for status in societies. In this way, the wealthy make it increasingly difficult for others to keep up with the rising standards for consumer goods and to maintain a respectable social status—it makes others envious. Indeed, spending on luxury goods has grown four times as fast as overall spending in the last decades—and this in a time of static or declining incomes of middle- and low-income families (holding purchasing power constant) (Frank 2020, ch. 2). The negative effects of extreme wealth, empirical scientists argue, include not only the relative deprivation of the non-rich, but the status deficiency and social exclusion they experience in not being able to live up to societal expectations and fulfil their own ambitions—not least by not being able to afford status goods needed to maintain a normal appearance and existence (Walker 2014; Jo 2013).

Considering this from a different theoretical perspective, the capability approach, it can be illuminating to interpret status competition in terms of *conversion factors*—that is, the ability of individuals to convert resources into opportunities (Robeyns 2005; Nielsen & Axelsen 2017). Extreme wealth comes with extreme advantages in purchasing power, meaning that the extremely wealthy enjoy a dominant position to acquire status goods. As the above-mentioned empirical studies suggest, their consumption behaviour influences, even if unintentionally, the conversion factors of the non-rich negatively. Specifically, the consumption of the wealthy renders it more costly for the non-rich to convert resources into social status by constructing social norms which is continuously more difficult for people to live up to.

The value of luxury goods such as alligator skin sneakers is manifold. However, a (if not *the*) key aspect of their value is their ability to confer social status upon their owner. Goods, whose value depends greatly on the social status they confer upon their owner, are often referred to as *status goods*. Such goods gain their value (at least in part) from the price they carry (e.g., alligator skin sneakers), or the fact that other people do not own them (e.g., an original piece of art) (Miller 1975; Martineau 1958; Mason 1998). Ironically, then, people are often willing to pay a lot of money for

undercutting the abilities of the working poor to buy property or find accommodation. See Farrell (2020) and Schor (1999).

very expensive shoes, *because* they are expensive—or, we might say, because people will envy them.

To illustrate this, let us return to our alligator skin sneaker example, where having tried on Monica’s alligator skin shoes, Brandy immediately orders a pair for herself to quell her envy. Arriving at the school party a week later, Brandy realizes, to her disappointment, that most of her co-students have also bought the shoes, and she doesn’t get the status boost, she was hoping for—no one is envious of *her*. The example brings out that status competition creates zero-sum dynamics, which, in the long run, leaves no one better off. This, in turn, means that individuals have less money to spend on pursuing the fulfilment of their own preferences, their conception of the good life. As we noted when introducing the second interpretation of the envy objection: it distracts them from forming and pursuing their own conceptions of the good. In an important sense, then, status competition is a form of collective action problem where everyone is made envious and, thereby, brought to spend a greater share of their income on luxuries that, ultimately, make them no better off.

One might object that Brandy and Monica’s alligator skin shoe purchases were in line with their preferences and *part* of their conception of the good life. If this were the case, status competition would not be motivated by envy and, thus, not be problematic according to the envy objection. There are several reasons why this is not a convincing rebuttal, however. First, as Edward Miller explains: “Whenever a new status good is purchased, the losses of other individuals equal the gain of the person purchasing the good” (Miller 1985: 145).¹⁰ Thus, assuming that Brandy, Monica, and all their school mates receive the same status boost from purchasing the alligator skin shoes, they are effectively no better off in terms of status after having bought the shoes, than they were before. This element of the value of luxury goods, thus, is negated through status competition and, therefore, adds nothing to the pursuit of their conception of the good life.

Second, some people buy status goods out of social necessity and not because it is an expression of their preferences. What looks like envy from the outside might

¹⁰ See also Thorstein Veblen’s classical considerations on these matters (Veblen 1994).

actually be rational improvement of one's own situation. The social cost of not owning the relevant status goods can be high, making people unable to live up to societal standards or to pass the bar of normalcy, the failure of which, in the words of Adam Smith, make people "ashamed to appear in public" (Smith 2010, Book V, ch. II). When people have to spend a greater amount and proportion of their resources on status goods, it becomes increasingly costly to avoid such shame, and less resources are left for other personal projects. Even if people want to avoid distractions from their own projects, then, extreme wealth societies hinder their doing so by making it rational to, instead, engage in status competition through the purchase of luxury goods.

When buying status goods is seen as a social necessity, a link is revealed to the unmet needs argument in the Standard Defence. As argued by Jonathan Wolff in a study on the effect of relative poverty on social belonging, the connection between wealth and recognition is culturally constructed and socially dangerous in relatively poor societies where the need for possession of "status goods" is created out of the social need for signalling not being poor. As he observes in relation to a poor area of Kantutura, Namibia, the social need to fit in often causes poor people to purchase goods such as mobile phones or beauty products rather than to secure basic health for themselves and their family (Wolff 2015). This phenomenon illustrates the often very strong connection between wealth and social status, but it also underlines how it is an unnecessary, and often damaging, construct.

Regardless of whether individuals purchase the goods willingly (like Brandy) or purchase them reluctantly, however, the result is a collective action problem through which everyone is made worse off by the spending on status goods. As Judith Lichtenberg puts it, "I could admit that I would be better off having an item my neighbors have, and still maintain that a world in which we both had fewer things would be better still—that in such a world we would all better off" (Lichtenberg 1996: 280). In practice, of course, it is difficult to know about others—and, indeed, about ourselves—whether a good increases wellbeing independently of, or because of, the opinions of peers. And this leads to the third reason for why we should be sceptical of the claim that purchasing status goods is an integral part of someone's conception of the good life: namely that preference formation is, to a

significant extent, endogenous to a society's institutional setup and distribution of resources. In other words, which preferences people have is shaped by which kind of society they live in. In particular, citizens of very unequal societies are more likely to be envious because they worry more about their position vis-à-vis others because the larger gap means that they have more to lose (and gain).

The envy objection holds that redistribution of extreme wealth is motivated by envy and that claims founded on this problematically other-regarding sentiment should not be given time and weight in a just society. But societies in which some are extremely wealthy fuel and propel consumption of luxury goods and interpersonal competition based on envy. Rather than worrying about the motivations behind redistributive taxation, our scepticism about envy should lead us to oppose societies in which some amass great wealth, which leads to the propagation of luxury purchases and envy-fuelled status competition. Taking the values behind the envy objection seriously, then, can provide us with additional support for limitarianism, which can be used to bolster the Standard Defence: that extreme wealth societies perpetuate relations and feelings of envy.

The Levelling-Down Objection

The levelling-down objection holds that limitarian policies which seek to redistribute the wealth of the superrich do not, actually, lead to a more just outcome. This is because such redistributive measures will disincentivize those that are extremely wealthy from working longer hours and take money out of their hands that they might otherwise invest in profitable enterprises. As Deirdre McCloskey argues, restrictive regulations of the opportunities of the wealthiest to increase their wealth would involve a missed opportunity for a “dramatic increase of the size of the pie” (McCloskey 2017: 48). As a consequence, fewer resources will be available for redistribution towards meeting urgent needs. As the crux of the Standard Defence is that limitarianism should be pursued for the sake of the worst-off—meeting unmet urgent needs—this is potentially a quite decisive objection. Even if this money is redistributed to the worst-off, the objection goes, the accompanying reduction in overall growth means that they are not made better off than they otherwise would have been.

The levelling-down objection appears in many forms and covers many potential reasons for why limitarian redistribution would not result in a distributive outcome that is better for the worst-off. One specific version of this objection has been discussed at some length in the limitarian literature: the *incentive objection*; that “limitarianism entails a very strong disincentive for almost-rich people to contribute more to the creation of the social product by working harder, innovating smarter, and doing more business” (Robeyns 2016: 35). Robeyns acknowledges this worry and attributes its unavoidability to a trade-off between the two main components of the Standard Defence. Thus, the unmet urgent needs argument pulls in the direction of maximizing the social product, while the democratic argument pulls in the direction of minimizing inequalities. This trade-off, according to Robeyns, should prompt policy makers to carefully plot their course seeking to avoid both the Scylla of economic disincentives and the Charybdis of political inequality as far as possible.

As Alexandru Volacu & Adelin Dumitru point out, however, other measures, which involve less of a trade-off with the aim of meeting unmet urgent needs such as institutional reform, could be used to curb political inequalities. Such policies, however, do not appear to be limitarian as they are not targeting surplus money specifically. Since the value of political equality is better realized through non-limitarian policies, we should embrace a *weak* form of limitarianism, they hold, which is not dependent on the aim of alleviating significant political inequalities, but only on ensuring that unmet urgent needs are met (Volacu & Dumitru 2018; Timmer 2018).

We aim to defend limitarianism against Volacu and Dumitru’s point—and against the levelling-down objection more generally—by indicating several ways in which the extreme wealth of the superrich can harm the non-rich and society, more broadly. Doing so casts doubt on the force of the levelling-down objection by seeking to show that societies in which some are extremely wealthy may, in many ways, be worse than proponents of the levelling-down objection assume. Hence, even if it reduces the overall social product, confiscating the wealth of the superrich may improve the prospects of the non-rich by eliminating the harmful consequences that follow from allowing the superrich to hold on to their extreme wealth. We seek to bolster the Standard Defence, then, by broadening the argument from equality,

arguing that extreme wealth may cause a wider range of problematic inequalities and societal issues that go beyond political inequality.

How extreme wealth harms the non-wealthy

Distributive justice is often said to concern the distribution of benefits and burdens among the members of a community. Whether one believes that a just distribution entails that everyone has an equal share, or a sufficient share of the community's goods and opportunities, the *value* of one's share is often (partly) determined by what others have, do, and express (Brighthouse & Swift 2006; Axelsen & Nielsen 2015; Ben-Shahar 2018). When the value of a good is (partly) determined by how much of this good one has compared to others, the good has *positional* aspects (Nielsen & Axelsen 2017). This can play out in different ways. First, the value of a resource or capability is (partly) determined by the holdings and actions of others when the resource determines one's access to participation in collective projects—e.g., influence on a political decision, the value of which is dependent on how much influence others have (i.e., the ability to set the agenda, sway decision-makers, and directly influence the outcome). This, political equality, is the issue on which Robeyns focuses.

Besides providing improved access to political decisions, the macro-level of societal regulation, the wealth of the superrich can also increase their access to the regulative micro-level by expanding their influence on social norms. Thus, the wealthy often have greater direct influence on norms and standards for what is considered virtuous and what constitutes appropriate or normal behaviour. As Iris Marion Young notes, the standards of merit by which people's skills and competencies are judged are not normatively and culturally neutral. Instead, those who are in positions to hire and promote others rely heavily on class indicators such as politeness, articulateness, authoritativeness, punctuality, etc (Young 2011, ch. 7).¹¹ Not only are the wealthy more likely to exhibit such traits (due to socialization and education), but they also tend to have greater power over *which* traits are judged and *how*. In this way, they

¹¹ See also Regilme (2019).

often have the power to influence the shape and rules of the playing field on which people compete for valued positions, which, in turn, bring additional social status.

Along these lines, the wealthy—often without malicious intent—can tailor social norms to the behaviour that is normal, appropriate, and possible for someone of their background, education, and prosperity level. In this way, the wealthy may render it increasingly difficult for others to conform to the required norms and maintain a respectable social status (Friedman & Laurison 2020). Besides facilitating political inequality, then, extreme wealth can create problematic inequalities in societal influence more broadly: leaving the non-rich with diminished access to power over behavioural rules, interpersonal expectations, and social norms.

The value of someone's share of goods and opportunities may also be positional in ways other than through participation in collective projects and regulation, however. The value of a good is also (partly) determined by what others do and have when it is determined through competition—as in the case of someone's chances of getting a specific job, which is dependent on the number, quality, and attitudes of other applicants. For example, wealth may allow individuals to improve their (and their children's) chances in the competition for educational opportunities by making them able to pay high tuition fees, hire private tutors, etc. In doing so, the wealthy and their children may also gain increased opportunities in the competition for coveted jobs. In both cases, their improved capabilities decrease the chances of success for other, less wealthy citizens in competing for and acquiring scarce positions in education and the labour market.

The ability of the super-rich to influence politics and attain top positions may also allow them to *further* complicate the path to success of the less fortunate. In other words, the extremely wealthy are uniquely positioned to influence rules and regulations, which may make it easier for them to accrue further benefits going forward, and shape social norms, which, again, may make it easier for them to enhance and sustain their social standing in the future. The non-wealthy, then, are harmed, not once, but twice, by the wealth of the superrich: first, by losing political influence, labour market competitiveness, and status through the positionality of the uses to which extreme wealth can be put, and, second, by the ways in which the

extremely wealthy can use these advantages to further skew the playing field in their favour.

Finally, wealth can be positional when the value of a resource or capability is determined by one's relations with others—e.g., social status, the value of which is determined by interpersonal evaluations. This happens when a good is linked to the way in which others evaluate one's capabilities; talents, resources, and traits (Nielsen & Axelsen 2017).¹² In this way, most goods have positional aspects through their impact on social status. Wealth, in this sense, also impacts social status.¹³ The wealth held by the rich in society translates into increased social status, which, in turn, erodes the social status of the non-rich.

One particularly comprehensive analysis of how such inequalities in positional goods harm the non-rich is Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's influential study of how "inequality gets under our skin" (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Wilkinson and Pickett's analysis emphasizes how material inequality negatively affects the health and well-being of people in unequal societies by increasing levels of stress and social anxiety. Such effects are caused, they argue, because of how status differences arise from material inequality. In a society marked by extreme wealth, the non-rich are not merely *comparatively* worse off than the economic elite in terms of political power and social status. They are also harmed through manifest threats to their health and well-being exactly *because of* this status comparison. Moreover, as the levels of wealth in the hands of the few continue to grow, we should not expect this negative effect of status inequality on well-being to diminish. As Wilkinson and Pickett note in their more recent follow-up, "[O]ur argument is not that there was a time when people did not make social comparisons, but that they have become more important to our sense of ourselves than they once were" (Wilkinson & Pickett 2018, p. 10).

The non-rich, then, may be harmed by the positional effects of wealth in at least four different ways, of which the standard defence only emphasizes the first. As Robeyns notes, extreme wealth leads to political inequalities. As we've noted here, this type

¹² See Harting 2021 for discussion.

¹³ For an insightful analysis of how this positionality occurs in certain cultural processes see (Lamont, Baljean & Clair 2014).

of positionality extends beyond influence on political decision-making to influence on collective projects, expectations, and societal regulation more generally. The extremely wealthy often enjoy increased influence on the shaping of social norms, for example, which, in turn, translates into decreased influence for the non-rich. Second, the wealthy enjoy advantages in competitive settings such as education and the labour market due to their wealth—disadvantaging the non-rich in their pursuit of coveted social positions. Third, wealth tends to improve social status, decreasing the social status of the non-rich as a consequence. Fourth, since status inequality affects people's well-being through social mechanisms that increase stress and anxiety, extreme wealth poses a significant threat to the well-being of the non-rich.

But these positional mechanisms also bring with them a more general societal worry: with increased inequalities in influence, access to important positions, and social status come increased discrepancies in types of obstacles faced, in forms of lived experiences, and in everyday interactions. Deep and persistent differences of this sort are likely to lead to a lack of mutual understanding, a loss of community, a loss of solidarity. While our argument is more general, Elizabeth Anderson makes a similar point in reference to the case of elite schools. These institutions, she points out, “results in increasing segregation of the more from the less advantaged, and thereby, a deterioration of the social integration needed for a fully democratic civil society” (Anderson 2004: 107, see also Anderson 2007). This is worrisome in and of itself. This breakdown is exacerbated, however, when considered in conjunction with the social mechanisms identified above: the positional aspects of wealth and the ability and tendency of the wealthy to tilt the playing field to their advantage. Thus, it is particularly problematic when people whose behaviour and consumption may impact others greatly, who have the power and tendency to constrain the opportunities of others, cannot grasp the circumstances of and the consequences of their choices on the lives of these others.

Due to the increasingly segregated circumstances of extreme wealth societies, the extremely wealthy may be more likely to be insulated from and to misunderstand the claims of those over whom they exercise their power to tilt the playing field, since they have not lived through the distinctive experiences of being subject to power and authority, being held responsible, and being shamed (Anderson 2014: 7-

8). And, although this would be difficult to measure and show in any definitive sense, recent empirical studies suggest that the one percent are unique (among the wealthy) in holding the seemingly conflicting ideas that their wealth is a product of *both* good choices and genetic inheritance—indicating a set of norms that seem both particularly self-serving and detached from the experience of their poorer fellow citizens (Suhay, Klasnja & Rivero 2020).¹⁴

The Levelling Down objection assumes that increasing the social product is better for everyone; that inequality and extreme wealth can be outweighed if everyone gets more. Specifically, extreme wealth may be morally preferable if it leads to more resources becoming available for alleviating unmet urgent needs, solving collective action problems, and rectifying local disadvantages. It is on this assumption—of the presence of extreme wealth being better than its absence—that the objection that everyone is made worse off through disincentivizing the superrich is motivated. We have cast doubt on this assumption and shown that there may be many reasons to worry about the presence of extreme wealth, as it can drive social processes that involves significant harm to non-wealthy social groups and to societal solidarity, more generally. This happens through the different ways in which wealth is positional and the losses to community and solidarity that can occur in extreme wealth societies.

The Harrison Bergeron Objection

Finally, *the Harrison Bergeron objection*—named after the Kurt Vonnegut short story—holds that taxing the extremely wealthy is tantamount to restricting the pursuit of individual achievement and human excellence. The objection runs parallel to the Levelling Down objection to the extent that it focusses on the incentives of the wealthy, but rather than targeting the distributive outcome, this objection focuses on the general badness that comes from not having human beings aspire to do their best and excel—a type of *intrinsic* good. The Harrison Bergeron

¹⁴ As emphasized by scholars of system justification theory, furthermore, deprived citizens are likely to also embrace existing conventions of meritocracy and hierarchy—despite it being against their apparent (and real) interests. See Jost, Banaji & Nosek (2004).

objection is, thus, grounded on some form of moral perfectionism—the view that human excellence holds intrinsic moral value.

Grounded on a perfectionist morality, the Harrison Bergeron objection holds that limitarian policies—e.g., a wealth tax—would involve a significant threat to the prospect for the intrinsic value of human excellence through several channels. First, it would redistribute resources and opportunities away from individuals with high potential for excellence to individuals of more modest aptitude. Jeff Bezos, some might argue, has excelled in revolutionizing material consumption and goods distribution. Elon Musk, they might continue, has excelled in making hi-tech electric cars available to the middle class. Second, by reducing the incentives for large economic revenues, limitarians policies would decrease the incentives to strive for excellence in innovation and entrepreneurship, thereby posing a threat to human excellence even among individuals who are not (yet) rich. Third, we might expect that successful businessmen would (partly) lose their status as pioneering role models and consequently fewer would follow their lead into the risky, but valuable, endeavour of entrepreneurship.

According to this objection, the extremely wealthy are not only lucky, gifted in ways of fortune and prosperity, they are also *excellent* in what they do. And if we tax away the products of all their effort and hard work, we will, so the objection goes, amputate the intrinsic good of perfection. Thus unfolded, the Harrison Bergeron objection concludes that we ought to preserve the wealth of the extremely wealthy because this is how the value of human excellence is most effectively cherished and realised. If policies are designed in ways that threatens this excellence, we risk losing out on something of great intrinsic value.

Note, first, that some accounts of limitarianism could shortcut the Harrison Bergeron objection simply by rejecting perfectionism from the beginning. If there is no such thing as human perfection, or if perfection has no intrinsic value, then the Harrison Bergeron objection misfires. However, since our purpose is to respond to popular real-world objections, we need (and want) to grant the assumption that it is intrinsically valuable when humans excel. Our aim in this section is to show that

even on this perfectionist assumption, we should be sceptical about the Harrison Bergeron objection.

There are several problems with the account of perfectionism underlying the Harrison Bergeron objection, of which we shall discuss three. First, on some readings of the objection, it is explicitly *elitist*. This elitism can be understood in two different ways. One way of understanding the Harrison Bergeron objection assumes that the excellence of a minority elite is of greater value than excellence for the rest. In other words, the objection assumes that it is more valuable when some (wealthy) human beings excel than when other (non-rich) human beings do. On this reading, we should not stunt the success of the superrich, as their excellence is of particular value. While some conservatives and nationalists may espouse some kind of “natural” hierarchy between human beings, this kind of blatant elitism would be unpalatable to most (and politically unmarketable). Any plausible account of perfectionism must hold that human excellence is equally valuable independently of its source. This first reading of the objection can, therefore, be set aside as fundamentally unconvincing.

Another way of understanding the elitism of the Harrison Bergeron objection assumes that some are especially privileged in their natural tendency to perfection. Resources, then, must be left in the hands of those who are able to achieve such perfection; in order to allow them to fulfil their greater potential. Perfection, on this reading, is reserved only for the minority elite with excellent natural potential. Put in the words of Nietzsche, once an individual’s life is shown to hold great potential for perfection, “extreme care may be taken over the preservation and promotion of his development”. For individuals for whom this is not the case, on the other hand, “the first demand of fairness is for him to take as little space, force, and sunshine as possible away from the well-constituted” (Nietzsche 1968: 200). Redistributing resources away from the wealthy, on this view, prevents them from achieving excellence—like depriving Serena Williams of her opportunity to play tennis. This alternative elitist reading of the objection seems closer to what people raising the objection actually believe, but this also seems theoretically problematic. It relies on an unsubstantiated discriminatory and prejudiced account of what perfection is and who can achieve it. Any plausible, contemporary account of perfectionism holds that

some form of human perfection is within the reach of any human person, if given the right opportunities, and to deny that would require rejecting a central and deep-rooted assumption of basic moral equality, the rejection of which would make distributive theorising questionable. Consequently, the Harrison Bergeron objection cannot reasonably be based on a presumption that the extremely wealthy is of special moral worth or exceptionally disposed for perfection.

This response might be all we need in order to convince perfectionists with a basic egalitarian disposition that we should dismiss the Harrison Bergeron objection. But real-world political agents usually do not embrace liberal egalitarian conclusions as readily or explicitly as most philosophers do.¹⁵ Indeed, many of those who are against wealth taxes may simply deny the assumption of basic moral equality and, thus, bite the bullet of this kind of “perfectionism of the few”. Therefore, a satisfactory response to the Harrison Bergeron objection, which is to have real-world bite, needs a stronger argumentative underpinning.

A second response, which even the most elitist perfectionist must take into account, concerns the relation between wealth and excellence. The Harrison Bergeron objection seems to assume that the accumulation of wealth is a strong indicator of great perfectionist value. But even if we grant that the extremely wealthy are successful in a certain form of excellence and that their extreme wealth is part of the package of their success, it cannot be the wealth, *per se*, that is their excellence. Material resources are per definition only *means to* valuable aspects and thus of mere instrumental value. And given that little perfection can come from surplus money—or even just granting the more general economic assumption of decreasing marginal utility of material resources—a more plausible interpretation would resemble Hurka’s quasi-prioritarian perfectionist conclusion that, in general, “resources are more effective in helping people move from low to medium levels of perfection than from there to highest perfection” (Hurka 1996: 169). In other words, being wealthy is not an indicator of excellence—more conceivably, wealth is a *stimulator* of excellence, making it achievable for people to excel via paths that were

¹⁵ Since we are focused on real-world political agents and their concerns, we should also take into account what these concerns actually consist in (Konow 2003). Taking such concerns into account, however, amounts to more than simply surveying popular opinion (Frohlich & Oppenheimer 1992).

previously closed to them. If this is true, however, the objection seems to provide us with no conclusive reasons for why excellence is best achieved when leaving the lion's share of society's resources in the hands of only a few fortunate individuals.

Third and finally, most plausible accounts of perfectionism are not as narrow as the Harrison Bergeron objection seems to assume (Finnis 1980; Nussbaum 2011). The objection seems to imply that business skills, entrepreneurship, and marketability (or other ways to excel that leads to extreme wealth) are the only true expressions of human perfection. But while such skills might count as a successful activation of *one* faculty of human excellence, there are other expressions which perfection can take—e.g., art, knowledge, sociability, care, political participation, Michael Laudrup—which does not involve a close connection to wealth. More concretely such a narrow account of perfectionism would exclude such important instances of human excellence as Socrates, Gandhi, Vincent Van Gogh, and Mother Theresa—ones who, arguably, excelled not *despite* their lack of wealth, but at least in part *because* of it.

However, the Harrison Bergeron objection seems harder to defend if based on a less narrow conception of human perfection. Even if we assume that limitarian policies (e.g., a wealth tax) will, to some extent, reduce human perfection in the sphere of entrepreneurship, it would still need to be shown that such policies would imperil ways of excelling that may not make individuals wealthy. After all, resources collected through, for example, a wealth tax could plausibly be used to draw poor people out of poverty and, thereby, stimulate perfection by opening up paths that were previously closed to them. Thus, it seems, the burden of proof is on proponents of the Harrison Bergeron objection to show that excellence, understood as something that covers more than just abilities that allow you to amass wealth, is, in fact, best protected by allowing the superrich to retain their wealth.

This perfectionist counterargument to the Harrison Bergeron objection reinforces the two arguments in The Standard Defence. Thus, a plausible, non-monist account of perfectionism seems to bring us to the same conclusion that the Standard Defence espouses: that the protection of unmet basic needs should be prioritized over the ability to retain extreme wealth. Once we recognise that human excellence is not

plausibly understood as narrowly concerned with entrepreneurship and wealth accumulation or as applicable only to a narrow elite, it looks less plausible that excellence is best ensured by leaving wealth in the hands of those who already have too much, rather than opening up routes to excel for others. On closer inspection, then, a concern with human excellence and a commitment to perfectionism does not serve the case of the Harrison Bergeron objection; if anything, it seems to add force to the arsenal of arguments for the limitarian conclusion.

Conclusion

Our aim in this paper was to elaborate and widen the foundation of limitarianism beyond the ground on which the Standard Defence is built. We have done this through a philosophical exploration of three popular objections to the confiscation of extreme wealth. These serve as a proxy for limitarian policy and help us broaden the limitarian project in a way that aligns with the stated aim of many limitarian scholars to address real-life political issues. The three objections are the envy objection, the levelling down objection, and the Harrison Bergeron objection. This is certainly not meant to be an exhaustive list of objections to limitarianism. Rather, it is an attempt to capture three of the central lines of scepticism deployed in political discourse. Other possible objections could be raised, for example, in reference to individual property rights or the inefficiency of public expenditure, but these are beyond the scope of this paper. None of the three objections we have discussed, it turns out, are successful as critiques of the limitarian project. On the contrary, elaboration of their central normative factors—non-envy, the well-being of the non-rich, and human excellence, respectively—seems in several important ways to add new weapons to the arsenal of limitarianism which go beyond those proposed in the Standard Defence.

Conflicts of interest

Nothing to declare

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