



# Introduction: Symposium Limitarianism: Extreme Wealth as a Moral Problem

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## Abstract

The growing concentration of wealth has acquired a new urgency in recent years. One particular view in this context is developed by Ingrid Robeyns in her ground-breaking work on *limitarianism*. According to this view, no one should have more than a certain amount of valuable goods, such as income and wealth. The contributors to this symposium, Brian Berkey, David Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen, Jessica Flanigan and Christopher Freiman, and Lena Halldenius, critically examine various aspects of limitarianism. In particular, they examine how limitarianism should be interpreted and developed as a principle of justice, on what reasons speak in favour and against limitarianism, and on how limitarianism relates to other principles of distributive justice. Our hope is that this symposium will contribute to the ongoing debate in political philosophy about the concentration of wealth and economic justice.

**Keywords** Limitarianism · Distributive Justice · Wealth · Billionaires · Robeyns

## 1 Introduction: Symposium Limitarianism: Extreme Wealth as a Moral Problem

The growing concentration of wealth has acquired a new urgency in recent years. Economic inequality is fierce and, in many countries, still rising. It arguably contributes to political inequality, social stratification, and a distribution that harms the interests of the poor. In light of this, there is a pressing need for work in normative political theory that engages closely with both sides of economic inequality. While there is much work on poverty, much less work is done on wealth and its concentration. This leads to the question of what theories of justice have to say about the rich and their wealth. Are there distinctive features about the rich compared to the ‘merely’ affluent that we should worry about? Should there be limits

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to how much wealth and income people can appropriate? And what kinds of institutions and policies are most defensible in curtailing the harmful effects of extreme wealth?

One particular answer to these questions is developed by Ingrid Robeyns in her groundbreaking work on *limitarianism* (2017, 2019, 2022). According to this view, no one should have more than a certain amount of valuable goods, such as income and wealth. The contributors to this symposium, Brian Berkey, David Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen, Jessica Flanigan and Christopher Freiman, and Lena Halldenius, critically examine various aspects of limitarianism. In particular, they examine how limitarianism should be interpreted and developed as a principle of justice, what reasons speak in favour and against limitarianism, and how limitarianism relates to other principles of distributive justice.

Brian Berkey's article argues that limitarianism is incompatible with institutionalism, which is the view that principles of justice only apply directly to the institutions of the basic structure of society but not to, for example, individuals. Instead, Berkey argues that the arguments adduced in defence of limitarianism give us no reason to believe that individuals are entitled to possess resources above the threshold. David Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen discuss three popular objections to redistributing extreme wealth, namely that this legitimises envy, that it makes everyone worse-off, and that it undercuts the pursuit and achievement of human excellence by depriving successful people of resources through which they may otherwise excel. They argue that the case for limitarianism may be expanded and strengthened by critically examining and ultimately rejecting these objections. Jessica Flanigan and Christopher Freiman argue against preventing people from amassing extreme wealth via increased taxation. They discuss and reject both arguments Robeyns makes in favour of limitarianism. According to them billionaires' resources would not be better spent addressing morally important goals such as meeting disadvantaged people's needs and solving collective action problems. They also argue that billionaires do not have an inappropriate amount of influence in public life, to such an extent that it undermines political equality. Finally, Lena Halldenius questions Robeyns' claim that limitarianism is justified as a partial theory of economic justice and that it is valuable as a problem-driven philosophy aimed at addressing problems in the actual world from an egalitarian point of view. According to Halldenius more egalitarian theories of justice can better achieve the normative goals of limitarianism. She also argues that empirical findings about the correlation of actual inequality in countries and peoples' attitudes to those inequalities suggest that limitarian policies are unstable and might even fuel acceptance of inequalities.

These four articles provide new insights in the case for and against limitarianism in distributive justice and policymaking. The hope is that this symposium will contribute to the ongoing debate in political philosophy about the concentration of wealth and economic justice.

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