



The Argument from Unmet Urgent Needs Does Not Support Limitarianism

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Abstract

The essay demonstrates that the argument from unmet urgent needs does not support limitarianism, which is a (partial) theory of justice that holds that there should be an upper limit on wealth. The argument, which has been used in support of limitarianism, leads to the conclusion that we should redistribute resources to combat extreme poverty. However, a concern for unmet urgent needs does not establish whose resources should be redistributed for that purpose. It is consistent with redistribution both above and/or below some limitarian threshold. Such an upper limit would thus have to be supported by other reasons, such as the democratic argument or a concern for justice at the top. Contrary to what limitarians have suggested, the argument from unmet urgent needs has a rather limited relevance for limitarianism. The essay will outline the argument and the problem with its use in support of limitarianism, followed by a discussion and rejection of three strategies that limitarians could adopt to make the argument relevant.

Keywords Limitarianism · Urgent needs · Argument from unmet urgent needs · Justice · Redistribution

Introduction

Limitarianism refers to a (partial) theory of justice proposed by Ingrid Robeyns (2017, 2019, 2022, 2024), according to which there should be an upper limit on wealth, which she refers to as the *limitarian threshold*. Robeyns (2022, pp. 253–254) argues that the upper limit should correspond to what she calls the *riches line*, beyond

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which wealth does not contribute further to human flourishing (see Elgarte 2025 and Robeyns 2025 for a discussion of the precise definition of the riches line). However, she leaves open the principal possibility that the limitarian threshold could be set at a different point, as proposed by Timmer (2021, 2024). Robeyns advances two main arguments for limitarianism: the democratic argument and the argument from unmet urgent needs. In this paper, I will focus on the argument from unmet urgent needs, according to which there ought to be significant redistribution to address global poverty, though Robeyns also mentions climate change. I will show that a concern for pressing issues such as poverty does not provide grounds for limitarianism. The paper proceeds as follows. In the section “[Limitarianism and the Argument from Unmet Urgent Needs](#)”, I introduce key limitarian concepts and offer a formal statement of the argument from unmet urgent needs as a baseline for discussion. In the “[Discussion](#)” section, I show that the argument does not provide grounds for adopting an upper limit without significant further normative assumptions. While such assumptions are plausible, they ultimately rely on a concern for justice at the top, not a moral concern for unmet urgent needs.

Limitarianism and the Argument from Unmet Urgent Needs

Limitarianism is the view that there should be an upper limit on wealth, which Robeyns (2022, pp. 253–254) calls the *limitarian threshold*. For limitarianism to involve a substantive claim, I understand it to imply that wealth below and above the limitarian threshold should be treated differently (see Timmer 2021 for an alternative view). *Excess wealth* refers to any wealth that a person holds above this threshold, which they therefore ought not to have. A possible candidate for the limitarian threshold is the *riches line*, which Robeyns defines as the threshold beyond which additional wealth, referred to as *surplus wealth*, does not contribute to human flourishing. Robeyns proposes two main arguments for limiting wealth. The democratic argument, which will not be discussed further here, holds that extreme wealth undermines democracy and should be rejected on these grounds (Robeyns 2019, pp. 254–256). Chan’s (2025) Confucian support for limitarianism rests on similar relational grounds, emphasizing the need for equality for social harmony. The argument from unmet urgent needs instead proceeds from the observation that there are serious moral challenges such as global poverty and climate change that require significant financial resources to address (Robeyns 2019, pp. 257–258). According to Robeyns, surplus wealth should be used for these purposes. The argument from unmet urgent needs is supposed to lead us to adopt the riches line as a limitarian threshold (Robeyns 2022, p. 257).

Robeyns does not provide a formal statement of the argument from unmet urgent needs, leaving some ambiguity about what precisely she takes the premises of the argument to be. The following formulation is logically valid. While it may not correspond exactly to what Robeyns has in mind, it can serve as a baseline for discussion for the purposes of this paper. As I will show, this argument does not lead us to limitarianism, meaning that an additional assumption is required. It is this additional

assumption, rather than a concern for unmet urgent needs, that must motivate a limitarian threshold. The formulation I propose is the following:

Premise 1 Unmet urgent needs are problems of significant moral urgency.

Premise 2 There are at least some unmet urgent needs that can only be addressed through redistribution and that can be addressed in such a way without thereby sacrificing anything of (comparable) moral value.

Premise 3 If we can address a problem of significant moral urgency without sacrificing anything of (comparable) moral value, then we should address it.

Conclusion We should redistribute wealth to address some unmet urgent needs.

My reconstruction of the argument is influenced by Singer's (1972, 2011, pp. 234–245) well-known writings on poverty. While Singer is of course a utilitarian, the argument as reconstructed here does not depend on a utilitarian conception of the good, as it does not specify what exactly counts as morally valuable or how we ought to conceptualize human well-being. It is thus compatible with the more Aristotelian and capabilitarian conception of flourishing adopted by Robeyns. Premise 3 certainly appears broadly consequentialist due to its comparison of different outcomes, but that different uses of money can have a higher or lower moral significance is clearly also assumed by Robeyns (2022, p. 254) and is central to her argument. A deviation from Singer's argument is that the focus is on political action to redistribute resources, rather than voluntary donations by charitable individuals. A potential challenge to such a political approach is that forceful redistribution through expropriation or taxation, rather than voluntary giving, might be seen as morally problematic from a right libertarian perspective (cf. Nozick 1974, pp. 26–53). Right libertarians could reject the second part of premise 2, as forced redistribution would sacrifice something of comparable moral value, namely property rights. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will accept that there is at least some redistribution which is morally permissible and even morally obligatory due to the significant suffering that could be alleviated with such redistribution. A more moderate version of right libertarianism will be returned to in the next section.

Some critics of Robeyns have argued that her limitarianism is redundant as a distributational principle or that it is simply a by-product of sufficientarianism (cf. Axelsen and Nielsen 2024, pp. 5–6; Huseby 2022, p. 237). Indeed, Robeyns, as demonstrated by her use of the argument from unmet urgent needs, clearly shares the 'positive thesis' (Casal 2007, p. 298) of sufficientarianism, which claims that it is very important for everyone to have enough. However, it is equally clear that Robeyns moves beyond this positive thesis by postulating a limitarian threshold, which is not implied by sufficientarianism on its own. In fact, Robeyns's insistence that resources needed to satisfy unmet urgent needs should be taken from those above the riches line contradicts the negative thesis of sufficientarianism advocated by Frankfurt (1987) (for an alternative view see Hickey 2023, pp. 222–223), though the negative thesis is contested within sufficientarianism (cf. Shields 2020). Frankfurt argued that distribu-

tion above the sufficiency threshold does not matter as long as everyone has enough, which implies that it does not matter whose resources above the sufficiency threshold are redistributed. While it may be legitimate to redistribute resources above the riches line, this equally applies to resources below the riches line as long as this does not cause anyone to drop below a sufficiency threshold. Thus, negative thesis sufficientarianism is in stark contrast to Robeyns's insistence that it is the very rich in particular who must provide the resources needed for poverty relief. Sufficientarianism without the negative thesis, so the positive thesis on its own, does not contradict Robeyns's claim, but it simply has nothing to say on the matter. Limitarianism thus exceeds the claims of sufficientarianism.

Robeyns's problem is a different one. Her position is simply not supported by the reality of unmet urgent needs which she cites in support of the riches line as a limitarian threshold (Robeyns 2022, p. 257). At least the argument that I have reconstructed here says very little about whose resources should be redistributed. As Halldenius (2022, p. 783) notes, '[t]he argument about urgent unmet needs supports redistribution in general, but not the limitarian way of doing it'. It does not tell us whether resources needed to mitigate extreme poverty should be taken from people above the riches line, rather than perhaps people somewhat below this threshold. It is Robeyns's stated intention to put the focus of the debate on the super-rich (Robeyns 2017, pp. 16–17) and those who hold moral obligations (Robeyns 2022, p. 262). But the argument from unmet urgent needs is ill suited to the task, because it revolves around the urgent needs of those who do not have enough. This problem has received some attention in the literature (cf. Volacu and Dumitru 2017, pp. 258–262; Huseby 2022, pp. 236–238; Halldenius 2022, p. 783). However, previous objections have left several possible responses unaddressed. In the following section, I will thus consider and refute three strategies that limitarians might adopt to establish a limitarian threshold based on a concern for unmet urgent needs. I will argue that ultimately, limitarianism depends on additional normative assumptions which have nothing to do with the urgent needs of the poor but instead concern justice at the top.

Discussion

The first strategy that limitarians are likely to adopt is to point towards the lack of moral significance of surplus wealth. Since surplus wealth does not contribute to the flourishing of its holder, it should be redistributed to satisfy unmet urgent needs. According to this strategy, the argument from unmet urgent needs, when combined with the lack of moral significance of surplus wealth, leads to limitarianism.

It is important to note that the lack of moral significance of surplus wealth cannot play the role of a positive reason for redistribution. Surplus wealth is, at least as far as this strategy is concerned, not intrinsically bad. It is just not a bad thing if it were to be reduced. The reference to the lack of moral significance of surplus wealth thus plays the role of countering a possible objection. Redistributing wealth could be objected to if something of (comparable) moral value was lost, which violates the condition of premise 3 of the argument reconstructed above. But since nothing of moral value is lost when surplus wealth is redistributed, this objection does not work.

The problem with this strategy lies in its continued dependence on unmet urgent needs as the sole positive reason for redistribution. But, as we have established, unmet urgent needs do not provide a positive reason to redistribute surplus wealth in particular. The argument from unmet urgent needs (see “[Limitarianism and the Argument from Unmet Urgent Needs](#)” section) does not provide a positive reason that resources must be taken from the richest first. There could be multiple ways to satisfy unmet urgent needs. Instead of taking resources from the richest, the state could, for example, increase taxes on the upper middle class. The upper middle class I define as those who are below the limitarian threshold, but whose loss in flourishing from redistribution is not of comparable moral significance to the unmet urgent needs of the poor. If our moral concern is solely for the unmet urgent needs of the poor or catastrophic climate change, it simply does not matter whether the resources to address these issues come from the very richest or from the upper middle class. Some surplus wealth could be left to its holders, while addressing unmet urgent needs with upper middle class wealth instead. Any normative distinction between wealth above and below the riches line must necessarily go beyond a pure moral concern for the urgent needs of the poor. If we think that wealth above the riches line should be prioritized for redistribution over upper-middle-class wealth, it is because we think upper-middle-class wealth matters at least somewhat or deserves to be protected from confiscation. The urgency of the needs of the poor has nothing to do with it.

This demonstrates that even in combination with the premise that surplus wealth does not contribute to human flourishing, the argument from unmet urgent needs does not lead to limitarianism. The limitarian threshold would instead have to be justified by a concern for distributive justice between the richest and the middle class. Perhaps it is unfair to the middle class that they should bear any of the burden, while others are richer. The threshold would thus be based on justice at the top. I will return to this at the end of this section.

The second strategy that limitarians could adopt for making the argument from unmet urgent needs relevant is to argue that surplus wealth is in fact the only wealth that can be legitimately redistributed. We must thus redistribute wealth above the riches line (or perhaps some other limitarian threshold), as wealth below that threshold is off limits. It is not clear why one would believe that wealth below some threshold should be completely off limits. One possible reason is the right libertarian consideration already touched on above. From a right libertarian perspective, taking away others’ property violates their human rights (Nozick 1974, pp. 26–53). However, limitarians can take a more moderate libertarian stance and insist that this does not apply to surplus wealth, as it does not contribute to the owner’s flourishing. Forcefully redistributing wealth above the riches line is thus not problematic in the same way that redistributing wealth below the riches line is. Notably, this moderate libertarian approach seems to lead to the riches line as the limitarian threshold, which is in line with Robeyns’s assertions.

Such a strategy requires two assumptions. The first assumption is that the resources needed to satisfy all unmet urgent needs are more than or equal to the surplus wealth of the super-rich. Huseby’s (2022, p. 237) objection to limitarianism relies on denying this assumption. If the requirement for poverty relief (and other urgent causes) was any less, then not all wealth above the riches line would have to be confiscated.

Let us assume, however, that in the face of widespread global poverty this assumption holds true. The second assumption is that it is morally impermissible to take resources from below the riches line for these purposes, e.g. because it violates property holders' human rights, while it is morally unproblematic to confiscate resources above the riches line.

The problem for limitarians that want to rely on the argument from unmet urgent needs is that it would be the impermissibility of distribution below the limitarian threshold, not any consideration for unmet urgent needs, that actually establishes the threshold. The argument from unmet urgent needs would thus have very little to do with the limitarian threshold. The argument by itself is perfectly compatible with redistributive regimes which do not include such a threshold and redistribute wealth both above and below the riches line. A moral concern for unmet urgent needs is thus not what does the argumentative work in establishing limitarianism. Rather than arguing in favour of extensive redistribution, limitarians would have to defend the in my opinion implausible claim that any redistribution of wealth below the riches line is morally prohibited, even when it serves to address morally urgent matters such as extreme poverty and climate change.

Halldenius (2022, p. 783) argues that limitarianism has the implication that 'combating climate change and poverty is less morally important than letting the affluent keep their wealth as long as they continue to flourish by it'. But this charge can at best be levied against Robeyns's insistence that the limitarian threshold corresponds to the riches line (Robeyns 2022, p. 257). The third strategy, which I will turn to now, avoids this objection entirely by recognizing that redistribution below the riches line can still be justified. As Singer (1972) argued in his famous pond thought experiment, we should accept minor inconveniences to save a child from starvation. Similarly, while losing wealth below the riches line leads to a loss in flourishing, this can be outweighed by more serious moral concerns, such as unmet urgent needs or climate change. This consideration leads Timmer (2024) to suggest that the limitarian threshold should be somewhere below the riches line. Following this line of thinking, the following approach for determining the limitarian threshold seems to make the most sense. Resources should be taken from the richest and allocated to combating extreme poverty or climate change until either (a) *all urgent needs are satisfied and climate change is sufficiently mitigated* or (b) *the loss in flourishing of the richest becomes so significant that it is no longer outweighed by other moral concerns*. Whichever one of these is satisfied first becomes the limitarian threshold.

While this method for determining the limitarian threshold seems plausible at first sight, such a threshold does not follow from pure concern for unmet urgent needs. Let us first consider the case in which the limitarian threshold corresponds to (a). The problem here is the same as with the first strategy we considered. Limitarianism requires that the resources needed to combat poverty or climate change be taken from those above the limitarian threshold, rather than those below. But, as we have already seen, this cannot be motivated by the urgent needs of the poor, nor by climate change. The urgency of these problems does not dictate that we should address them by one means, such as redistributing the wealth of the (extremely) rich, rather than by other means, such as by taxing middle-class wealth situated somewhat below threshold (a). As with the previous strategies, the justification of the limitarian threshold would

have to be based on considerations of justice for the middle class, not unmet urgent needs of the poorest.

Point (b) serves as a plausible limitarian threshold only if the resources above the limit are less or equal to what is needed to satisfy all urgent needs (and prevent catastrophic climate change, etc.). In that case, all resources above the limit should be used to prevent as much suffering as possible. However, if the resources above the limit exceed what is needed, the argument from unmet urgent needs does not justify taking away all resources above the threshold. Should the resources above (b) exceed what is needed to combat poverty (and other urgent problems such as climate change), there would be no apparent reason that people should not be allowed to hold some of their resources above and beyond (b) (cf. Huseby 2022, p. 237). In fact, taking away these resources would quite possibly compromise their flourishing for no clear reason. Either way, the outlined approach does not successfully establish a limitarian threshold.

What is required to establish limitarianism is an additional premise along the following lines:

If an unmet urgent need can be met by redistributing either surplus wealth (which has zero moral weight) or upper-middle-class wealth (which has some moral weight), then the redistribution of surplus wealth should be preferred.

The premise essentially assumes that upper middle-class is also morally significant and should thus be shielded from redistribution if surplus wealth can be redistributed instead. It is this premise then, rather than a moral concern for the unmet urgent needs of the poor, that could ultimately lead to an upper threshold. Unmet urgent needs only play the limited role of establishing the need for some form of redistribution in the first place, which then leads to the follow-up question of whose resources ought to be redistributed. But to answer this, we will ultimately have to consider principles of distributive justice, such as the above premise, which concern distribution of tax burdens between the richer members of society.

That said, I believe that this missing premise has some plausibility. Surely, it is at least somewhat better for those with zero marginal moral value of their wealth to give up some of it, than if those somewhat below the riches line take a, albeit slight, loss to their flourishing. However, further exploration of the moral principle underlining the premise, as well as its further implications, is necessary. While Robeyns proposes limitarianism only as a partial theory, we must consider whether a correct full theory of justice would really contain the features of limitarianism. For example, we ought to ask ourselves if we should then not also redistribute wealth which has some moral weight (i.e. which is below the threshold) to those who gain only slightly more flourishing out of additional resources than the original owner. And if this is the case, is the resulting distributional principle really best described by a limitarian threshold, or does it not simply lead to a state of equality or an equalization of marginal flourishing? Whatever the answer may be, it ought to have become clear that a limitarian threshold cannot primarily be motivated by a concern for the urgent needs of the poorest, but would have to be justified based on the flourishing of the upper middle

class which would have their flourishing slightly reduced if some of their wealth was redistributed instead.

Conclusion

As I have shown, the argument from unmet urgent needs does not support a limitarian threshold. While addressing issues like extreme poverty and climate change is arguably of utmost moral significance, this does not tell us *whose* resources should be used to address these. While this objection has been raised in the literature before, my contribution has been to show that even in combination with the fact that surplus wealth does not contribute to flourishing or when lowering the limitarian threshold below the riches line, the argument does not lead to a threshold. Further normative assumptions regarding the moral significance of middle-class flourishing, which are unrelated to a moral concern for the urgent needs of the poor are needed. This of course does not mean that limitarianism is false. There could be other arguments for limitarianism. A limitarian threshold could potentially be justified based on a consideration of justice at the top. Redistribution of wealth below the limitarian threshold, without first redistributing all surplus wealth, could be seen as unjust towards those somewhat below the limitarian threshold. However, it is not unjust towards the poorest who would still benefit from such a redistribution. The democratic argument, which suggests that limitarianism is necessary for ensuring political equality, also remains an option for limitarians and has not been discussed here.

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Declarations

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