

Philosophy With Feet in the Mud: An Interview With Ingrid Robeyns

Ingrid Robeyns (Leuven, Belgium, 1972) is a philosopher at Utrecht University, where she has held the Chair in Ethics of Institutions at the Ethics Institute since 2014. She also serves as the president-elect of the Human Development and Capability Association. Before coming to Utrecht University, Robeyns held the chair of Practical Philosophy at the Faculty of Philosophy of Erasmus University from 2008 till 2014. She received an MSc in Economics from KU Leuven in 1997, an MA in Philosophy from the Open University in 2007, and a PhD from the Faculty of Politics and Economics from Cambridge University in 2003. Her PhD thesis, on applying the capability approach to gender inequality, was supervised by Professor Amartya Sen.

Robeyns does research in analytical normative philosophy, in particular on theories of justice and applied questions. She also regularly conducts interdisciplinary research. Robeyns is the author of *Wellbeing, Freedom, and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-Examined* (2017a). Her work has appeared in various journals, including *Ethics*, the *Journal of Economic Methodology*, the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, and the *Journal of Political Philosophy*. Robeyns is the principal investigator of *Fair Limits*, a research project funded by a European Research Council (ERC) consolidator grant, on the question whether there should be upper limits on the amount of financial and ecological resources a person can have. She was elected a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences this year.

The Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics (EJPE) interviewed Robeyns about her formative years, her scholarship on the capability approach, the Fair Limits project, the relevance of political philosophy for public policy, and her advice for young philosophers aspiring to an academic career.

EJPE's NOTE: this interview was conducted by Huub Brouwer and Manuel Buitenhuis. Brouwer is a PhD candidate at Tilburg University, specializing in desertist and luck egalitarian theories of distributive justice. Buitenhuis is policy-advisor at the directorate for the Labor Market and Social-Economic Affairs at the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. He conducted this interview in a personal capacity. Thanks to Annikka Lemmens for transcribing the interview, and to Willem van der Deijl, Bart Engelen, and Julien Kloeg for discussions on Professor Robeyns's work.

EJPE: Professor Robeyns, you started out your academic career studying economics at Leuven. What motivated you to do economics?

INGRID ROBEYNS: I think the essence is that I wanted to contribute to improving the world. Not necessarily directly, because otherwise I would have gone into politics, or so. But I thought economics was a good subject to contribute to improving the world, because in the end economists rule the world.

In what sense do you believe economists rule the world?

Well, I think it's actually not true anymore. It's more and more business people who rule the world, if any group can be singled out. But when you think about actors that may have the power to improve the world, it's in the first place the government and governmental institutions. And I think the government is mainly made up of economists and lawyers. But law never attracted me—I don't know why. Probably because I don't like learning by heart!

Was it clear to you from the outset that you wanted to become an academic?

No, no, absolutely not. My grandmother's sister, who was as a second grandmother to me, always said that I would one day be the prime minister of Belgium. So I probably had this drive to be a leader of sorts, to try to really serve the group for which I was working. But I should also say that I was talked into doing a PhD. That's actually very important to stress, because now there are people who look at me and think 'Oh but she really knew what she wanted, and she went for it'. But that is not entirely true.

You got talked into doing a PhD? How did that happen?

When I finished my economics degree, I had serious issues with economics as a discipline. I felt that the economics curriculum—the way I see it, and that's an important qualifier—was too ideological. It was too detached from the world, leaving too little room for normative questions. I recall a conversation when I was part of a student group that was advocating fair prices for banana farmers in Latin America. My professor of development economics recognized me as a member of that group, and asked me why we were advocating 'fair prices'. He said: 'there is no such a thing as a fair price. Prices are determined by supply and demand on the market'. At the time, I did not have the tools to

analyse why I was so bothered with such statements, but I had strong intuitions that this could not be the end of the story. Those matters made me believe I should go and do something else.

I left for a year to do a rural development programme in Göttingen, but quit early because it wasn't very good. I decided to stay in Göttingen and fill the year with courses I picked from social and political sciences, and enjoyed that a lot. But I still had no clue of what to do next. I was contemplating to take another degree in development studies, political science, or philosophy. Then, some day, I ran into Erik Schokkaert, my former professor of welfare economics from Leuven. He was looking for a PhD candidate, and he really talked me into taking that position. I remember that that conversation was, in retrospect, actually quite embarrassing for me. I essentially said to Erik that I couldn't do a PhD in economics, because it's a right-wing science. He was trying to convince me by saying that I could work on inequality, and on poverty and gender issues. In retrospect, if I were him, I would probably have thought: 'well if she doesn't want to do it, then fine—I'll find someone else'. But he supported me, and without his encouragement I am not sure I would be in academia today.

Were there other people that were of particular influence to you?

Amartya Sen is the obvious one. Erik Schokkaert and I agreed that it would be good for me to go abroad for a year. Erik suggested that I could work with someone like Stephen Jenkins, who does empirical poverty analysis. But then I was in the pub with the sociologist Sarah Bracke late at night and she asked me who I would like to work with, if I were to have a totally free choice. I said that it would be great to work with Amartya Sen, but that this was impossible. When Sarah asked why it was impossible, I responded 'listen, he's this big guy, how could I go and work with him?'. Sarah then made me promise that I would write to Sen, and every time I would see her, she would ask me 'Have you written to him?'. In the end I did write to Sen. I was of course nervous about that. I wrote that I was working on a PhD dissertation on gender inequality, using his capability approach, and asked whether I could spend a year with him. He said yes. That's how I came to Cambridge.

On a sidenote, this may actually be seen as a case of adaptive preferences. We always think adaptive preferences are for poor and oppressed people, but we also suffer from thinking that things are

impossible, when actually they are possible. We are simply socialized in believing they are not.

What I discovered at Cambridge was a whole new world. It's not just the level of the people there, but also the ease with which you could do interdisciplinary work, especially compared to the academic system in Belgium. In Cambridge, which has colleges, I met all these people from philosophy, sociology, history and many other fields. I really liked that. The intellectual freedom was amazing. So I didn't want to go back to Belgium. I applied to stay in Cambridge and Sen became my supervisor.

At Cambridge, I also interacted with many other scholars, such as the feminist theorist Juliet Mitchel, for whom I taught a course on gender inequalities, and the economic historian Jane Humphries, who introduced me to the world of feminist economics, which was very important for me at the time. Jane and I also co-edited, with Bina Agarwal, a double special issue of the journal *Feminist Economics* (2003). We did this while I was a PhD student, and I learnt a lot from her about the social rules and expectations of academia.

Knowing what you know now, would you still have studied economics? Or do you think you would have studied philosophy instead?

Well, in the end I studied both, but at first I started with economics. I'm very happy that I studied economics, because it makes you immune for thinking that money falls out of heaven, which some philosophers suffer from. It also prevents you from having these overly simplistic assumptions, like some radical egalitarians, who, in my view, do not take feasibility constraints and incentive objections sufficiently seriously. As an economist, you're always trying to think about efficiency; as a political philosopher, you're trained to always think of distributive consequences. The nice thing about studying both disciplines is that you never forget either.

The other thing that I'm really grateful for, is that I know how to read statistics. If you want to say something about the world as it is, you have to be able to do that. There are some philosophy programmes where philosophy students have to do a minor in another discipline, like psychology or biology. I think that's very good. I actually think it's better not to study *only* philosophy.

What I really like doing, in the end, is to try to come to all-things-considered judgements. This happens a great deal in applied ethics, but not always in political philosophy. To make all-things-considered

judgements, one always has to include some empirical information in the analysis. Hence it is an important skill for an applied political philosopher to know how to judge the quality of empirical research and to be able to read and interpret quantitative data.

Let's move to your recently published book: *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice: The Capability Approach Re-examined* (2017a). We're interested in this last word, 're-examined'. Why was a re-examination necessary?

The capability literature is relatively young if you compare it to, let's say, utilitarianism. In such a young literature, after a while, somebody needs to weed out mistakes and clarify stuff. Much of my work on the capability approach has been to clarify things and to try to bring structure to the discussion. What I tried to do in that book is to provide the most general account of the capability approach that is possible.

Writing such a general account is important, because there are many different people working within the capability approach. Sen and Nussbaum are most famous, but there are many others. This then prompts the question: What unites all that different research? The variety of research that claims to be within the capability literature is huge—from capabilitarian theories of justice, to inequality measurement, to discussions about curriculum design in schools, to social policy proposals for welfare states. Is it really coherent to say that all this research shares a common core? If so, what is that core?

It can be helpful to see that there is a distinction between the capability approach and capability theories. The capability approach is the general thing, and capability theories are the particular instances of the approach where you fill in the details. Sen, for example, has developed the outlines of the capability approach—but it's still very sketchy. Nussbaum has developed a capability theory.

In addition to generalizing, I wrote the book to help people in different disciplines to understand each other better. Finally, I raise a range of questions that people that are new to the literature pose again and again. You could say this is the 'frequently asked questions' part.

Do you think measurability is a problem for the capability approach?

We know it's very hard to measure freedoms. Take surveys, for example. There is a limit to how long a survey can be, because the response rate drops if the survey is too long and you'll get more sample selection bias.

The problem with the existing empirical studies in the capability literature is that most data are, at best, proxies for functionings and capabilities. Sometimes there aren't even clear proxies available. How do you measure stress, for example, let alone the freedom not to experience excessive amounts of stress? And how do you go about measuring the different combinations of functionings that people can realize?

Then there also is a policy problem: the capability approach is generally insufficiently specified to make concrete policy proposals. This is because making policy is not only about functionings and capabilities, but also about one's views on the appropriate division between societal and personal responsibility, the appropriate weighing of issues of fairness and sufficiency, and many other things.

I think the most powerful contribution of the capability approach is to show that if you have a purely money-based policy framework, then you're missing out on important dimensions. An example is the debate surrounding government incentives for women on the labor market, in which an increase in the number of women who have paid work is seen as a good thing. Such an increase isn't necessarily good, however. Whether it is, depends on whether women wanted this, what the costs are, what the distribution of care work within the household is, and so on. If you only look at economic indicators, you will miss out on these things.

Do we really need the capability approach to tell us that? Most economists would agree that money doesn't cover everything.

Yes, that's true—in theory. What I found is that in economics, and somewhat less in economic policy, there is this huge gap between what's possible in theory and what happens in empirical work. In theory, economics works with utility. But then the question is, what is utility? If you look at how it's translated to empirical work, there are these assumptions that make you end up analysing disposable income, or purchasing power, or comparable metrics. The econometrician Wiebke Kuklys and I wrote a paper together in which we show how a set of assumptions lead to this jump from welfare to income metrics, and how problematic the underlying assumptions are. That paper was ultimately published as a chapter of her book that was published a few months after her tragic early death in 2005.

There is something interesting going on in those discussions. I notice that if I talk with economists about the contribution of the capability approach or about other criticisms of economics, they are almost always very defensive. Or they will come up with examples where they actually did something that could counter the capability critique. But in the totality of the literature, these counter-examples are rare, and I believe that the critique of the capability approach on mainstream economics remains valid.

Your point is clear when it comes to the academic arena. Economists have a way of doing economics in which the domain of money is larger than seems justifiable. But if we look at the domains of policy and politics—civil servants, politicians—it would seem that they do weigh different domains. And the domain of money is smaller than in academic economics.

You're right that if my criticism has a bite, it's probably first and foremost for the academic world. But then it must be said that the academic world, of course, has an effect on policy-making. Take, for example, the number of people who live in absolute poverty in the world. That's determined by the absolute poverty measure of the World Bank—I'm not absolutely sure what it is now, but I think it's about 2 dollars a day. That's a money-based metric, and there are all these studies from development economists that show that we understate the incidence of poverty that way. This flows over into politics: on the basis of this monetary metric, some people say that globalization leads to a decrease in the total amount of people living in poverty. I'm not saying that's not true, but only that these are political consequences from the use of academic research, in this case the income-based measures.

Why are economists so slow on the uptake regarding these criticisms?

To use a bit of an exaggeration, I think economists are socialized to believe that they don't need to really engage with other disciplines. And if they do engage in other disciplines, they do it in a way that doesn't really respect those disciplines enough. Take the example of the work on identity economics by Akerlof and Kranton (2000). To economists that was very new, but if you look at sociological work on the topic, you know this is actually just all these sociological insights captured within an economic framework. Even heterodox economists, such as the feminist economist Nancy Folbre, had done work like that at length, but

that work doesn't use formal models, and hence is not acknowledged for what it actually contributes.

Economists sometimes reinvent stuff that has been done by other disciplines for a very long time. They should have a more open-minded attitude, in which they see other disciplines as genuine epistemic equals. I think there is some truth to the view, common among many non-economists, that economists often have an arrogant attitude towards other disciplines. And, of course, if you have that attitude, how can you learn from other disciplines? If you cultivate and socialize new economists in a way that makes it hard for them to learn from other disciplines, there will be quite a number of people, like me, who quit economics and move to neighbouring disciplines. There are plenty of excellent economists working in history departments, or in political science departments. They just couldn't do what they wanted to do within the economic discipline. In this way, there is a kind of disciplinary cleansing in economics: if you don't fit the quite strict methodological and paradigmatic requirements of what economics is supposed to be, you get frustrated and you leave.

And how should we change that? Do you have ideas on this?

I've stopped seeing this as my problem. You can't solve all problems, right? You have to pick your battles and I just think there is other work to be done. But I still think economics as a discipline should change. I also appreciate, however, that there is an increasing number of people who work on economic topics outside of economics. A good example is my colleague Bas van Bavel, an economic historian who works on long-term developments in capitalism and on inequality in wealth. Jane Humphries, the economist who was important for me when I was studying in Cambridge, also moved to economic history. The increasing number of PPE-programs shows a similar trend. It seems that rather than changing the house of the economists, some people are now building a new house, where economic issues can be analysed with a plurality of methodologies and ontological assumptions. I think that's a much more constructive project. What remains important is that people who study economic problems from these different viewpoints find their way into civil society, agencies such as the Dutch Central Planning Bureau, and other government structures.

Let's now move on to your ERC-funded Fair Limits project. When did you first get the idea for limitarianism?

Around 2012, it struck me that so few people were actually studying the rich, and decided to work on that topic when asked to give a keynote at a graduate conference of the Erasmus Institute for Philosophy and Economics (EIPE). I wondered whether it was possible to construct something like a poverty line, but then for rich people. There are people who have done empirical work and who just say: The rich are the richest 1%, then you have the richer, the 0,1%, and then you have the richest, the 0,01%. It seemed to me, however, that this is an unsatisfying way of conceptualizing richness. To get to a more satisfactory conceptualization, you could use the theoretical debates on the poverty line that happened mainly during the 1970s. So I first developed the richness line and then started to think about whether there are normative issues related to what we would call 'super rich people in society'.

You have hired a research team on the Fair Limits project. Could you sketch for us what you would like the team to have achieved in 2022, the year in which the project finishes?

There are two PhD positions in the project. Petra van der Kooij is working on ecological limits. The normative case for ecological limits is not too difficult. Given the limited capacity of the atmosphere to absorb greenhouse gases, none of us has a right to pollute without limit. The interesting questions regarding ecological limits are more about the speed with which we are making the transition to less pollution, how to deal with global inequalities in pollution, and what the duties of individuals are given that government policies are moving so slowly. Dick Timmer is working on limits on economic resources. There, the normative case for a limit is more complicated, because economic resources do not fall from heaven: somebody makes them. An interesting question here is to what extent limitarianism already follows from—or, is compatible with—existing views, such as Rawlsian egalitarianism or luck egalitarianism.

Next to the PhDs, there are also two postdoc positions on the project. Colin Hickey works on philosophical methods for the world as it is, which relates to the whole 'ideal theory' versus 'non-ideal theory' debate. I decided to make the entire project committed to the non-ideal turn in political philosophy, but there are still many questions related to

the methods non-ideal political philosophers should use. I hope that Colin and I can make some progress on that front. Tim Meijers works on who the agents of justice are. Political philosophy often just assumes that the state is the only agent, and we think that's problematic. One of the ways that the state may not be the sole agent, is that rich people can be encouraged to give away surplus money in philanthropy. Tim and I have written the philosophical chapter for a report of the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy on philanthropy and policies towards philanthropy in the Netherlands.

The fifth project is the one that I will do myself. I will look at what we can learn from non-Western philosophies when it comes to limits on economic and ecological resources—think of Chinese philosophy, Ubuntu philosophy, and indigenous philosophy. I will also work on synthesizing the five subprojects.

In your original article on limitarianism (2017b), you say that you are concerned only with “non-intrinsic limitarianism, and remain agnostic on the question of whether intrinsic limitarianism is a plausible view” (5).¹ Intrinsic limitarianism is the view that “being rich is intrinsically bad”; non-intrinsic limitarianism is the view that “riches are morally impermissible for a reason that refers to some other value” (5). To what extent do you think that intrinsic limitarianism could be a plausible view?

I doubt that it is a plausible view. The most obvious way you could argue for intrinsic limitarianism, is if you adopt an account of the human character or the human person in general, on which it harms you as a person if you are rich. On such a view, it is intrinsically bad to be rich, no matter what effect that has on public values. Perhaps you could defend this claim with a secular virtue-ethical account. Another possibility, if you are interested in philosophy of religion, might be to argue on the basis of the Bible or the Koran that a religiously virtuous person is a non-rich person. I haven't thought all of this through carefully, but I am doubtful that one can make a convincing argument for intrinsic limitarianism.

¹ All references from here onwards are to Robeyns (2017b), unless otherwise indicated.

The central claim of non-intrinsic limitarianism is that it is morally impermissible “to have more resources than are needed to [lead a] fully flourishing life” (2). What is a fully flourishing life?

I leave that open in my paper. I just say that we should decide this through a political process. There are colleagues who challenge me, saying that I should bite the bullet and provide a detailed and precise account of flourishing. My aim in this paper was different, however. I wanted to provide the structure of an argument for limitarianism. It does seem to me, though, that a plausible account of a flourishing life would account for the widely shared intuition that at some point, you have everything you need: An increase in riches will no longer lead to an increase in your quality of life—it will only allow you to gather more stuff.

But how about people who have expensive tastes? They might still experience increases in their quality of life for increases in income above the riches line?

Indeed, a counterexample to such an account of quality of life would probably be someone who has expensive tastes, for instance someone who really has a passion for collecting art and wants to buy all Van Goghs and Gauguins that are put up for sale. There is never really enough money if you want to do that. My response to this is threefold. First, if you think about how to organise society and design institutions, there will always be cases where somebody's situation has not been properly accounted for. Expensive tastes are, possibly by definition, those tastes that are statistically rare in the population. Second, the problem of expensive tastes is not only a problem for limitarianism, but for other views of distributive justice as well: They keep coming back when preferences play a central role in theorizing. Third, I try to do political philosophy for the world as it is. Some questions may be philosophically interesting, but it's sometimes almost obscene to focus so much on them. That is related to my meta-view on what philosophy should do.

We see that expensive tastes may not be a central concern for your project, but what would you say to someone who, through no fault or choice of his own, has expensive tastes that he could, given his income, satisfy? Would we need to tell this person that his income in

excess of the riches line has zero moral worth and should be taxed away?

So, suppose you are a kid and your parents have raised you to come to believe that it's normal to have caviar every day. I think the solution there is not to say that we should accommodate those expensive tastes in the flourishing account. Instead, I think the solution should be to say these preferences are morally bad and unsustainable, and that we should help the person who has them to get another set of preferences. Preferences are made, remade, and challenged all the time. Look at how our preferences regarding smoking changed drastically in recent years. I think that you will see a similar preference change regarding meat. You just see it beginning all around you now. Hence, preference formation processes occur all the time, and if someone has an expensive taste that is suboptimal from a collective point of view, there is at least a prima facie reason that we should try to change that preference, rather than accommodating the expensive taste without asking any questions about that preference.

A possible worry here is that this way of dealing with expensive tastes would be illiberal.

I think that the political and societal effects of preference formation should be a central project in political philosophy. Many of us have embraced the liberal paradigm that preferences are sacred and should not be touched. This is one point where we've been influenced by economics: whatever the consumer wants, the consumer wants; there are no moral questions to be asked. Although I am probably in essence a liberal philosopher, I do think we should look more critically at some of our basic views, including the view that if you want to show respect to people, you should not question their preferences. I think that's really a mistake.

Liberal political philosophers, following Rawls (1971) and Dworkin (1981), often attach great importance to their theories being neutral between different conceptions of the good. Do you think there would be a way of fleshing out limitarianism that is consistent with liberal neutrality?

That is a question that I should study. I don't have an answer to it yet. Some of the obvious challenges to limitarianism are challenges on the grounds of coercion, paternalism, and, indeed, neutrality. Then again, I

don't think we currently have neutral institutions either. What I really want to do with limitarianism is to study it as a framework for the world as it is. And there I think matters become muddier. Although we should try to be neutral, especially when it concerns religion, I don't think there is a way to organise society that is fully neutral in all relevant senses, and that does not come at an excessive cost in terms of sacrificing average wellbeing.

You adduce two arguments in defense of non-intrinsic limitarianism. The first is the democratic argument, according to which there should be a limit on how much money people can have, because otherwise the rich can acquire so much political influence that the “value of democracy” (6) and an “ideal of political equality” (5) would be undermined. We wonder why, exactly, the democratic argument is an argument for a limit, rather than equality an sich?

The reason is that surplus money is money that you do not need for a fully flourishing life. That means that if you have surplus money, you can basically spend it on anything, without affecting your own quality of life. People who do not have surplus money, on the other hand, can only influence politics at an opportunity cost to their own flourishing. Also, I don't think that we need full equal opportunity to political influence and power. The reason is that we are fine with people who are smarter, or who simply have many ideas about how to run a political party, having greater political influence and power. It is problematic if they have these because of morally arbitrary characteristics such as the amount of money they have.

On a related note, your democratic argument seems to suggest that political influence increases with income. Introducing a limit would then perpetuate the issue for people below that limit. Wouldn't a progressive tax for all incomes suit the argument better?

That depends on the details. If you were to construct a progressive tax system with a marginal tax rate on income and wealth at 70%, it could still be that someone with market luck would end up with quite a lot of surplus money. By definition, they could spend that surplus money on influencing political processes without any effect on their own flourishing. That is a difference with those situated below the riches line, since if they spend their money on political processes, it comes at the opportunity cost of their personal flourishing.

Whether a certain amount of money is enough to buy greater political influence and power depends on whether there are structures and institutions in a society that are able to shield the economic domain from the political domain. The democratic argument loses its force if it is impossible for people to turn economic advantages into political ones.

This brings me to an issue that is important to stress: We are investigating whether limitarianism is a view that can be defended. It may well be that after we have evaluated all the arguments for limitarianism, we find that none of them are very appealing. I do think, however, that the second argument I put forth in defense of limitarianism, the argument from unmet urgent needs, is quite strong. Hence, I do not anticipate that, five years from now, we will have to conclude that limitarianism should go into the dustbin of ideas.

Let's move on to this second argument for limitarianism. According to this unmet urgent needs argument, imposing a limit on how much income and wealth people can have is justified if one or more of the following three conditions holds: (a) extreme global poverty, (b) (significant) local or global disadvantages, and (c) urgent collective action problems. You point out that the argument is less demanding than T.M. Scanlon's Rescue Principle and Peter Singer's utilitarianism. On your view, we should only use excess money in order to alleviate conditions (a)-(c); not all money.

It seems that this claim relies on the assumption that all income and wealth up to the level of full flourishing has the same moral value, but that this moral value suddenly drops to zero at the level of full flourishing. If that were not the case, after all, then it seems we would be justified in taking money from those to whom it has less moral value, and giving it to those for whom it has more. Did we characterize this underlying assumption correctly? And, if so, would you be willing to defend it a bit more?

It's good that you ask this question, because you're not the first to ask it. The answer is that this definitely not an assumption I make. Limitarianism is a partial view. It says something about what should happen above the limit, but it's agnostic on what happens below it. How demanding limitarianism ultimately is, depends in part on how you fill out what happens below the riches line. The problem with Peter Singer's view is that you can no longer live your own life. You become a utility machine for solving the problems of other people. What I want to do, is

take that widespread criticism of Singer's view seriously. I think that everyone who does not have unmet urgent needs should contribute to solving the unmet urgent needs of others. The richer you are, the more you should contribute, and, at some point, you should basically contribute all additional money you have—that is, your surplus money. On such a view, you can still have your own plan of life.

You write that it “may turn out that certain limitarian views ... boil down to an already existing distributive view, or are compatible with an existing distributive view” (38). Have your thoughts on this developed? To what extent are certain forms of limitarianism, in fact, compatible with existing distributive views, such as luck egalitarianism, prioritarianism, or sufficientism?

There are philosophers, and I think it's very good that they raise this challenge, who ask whether limitarianism already follows from many of these existing accounts. That may be something we will conclude after five years: There is no need to do any further philosophical work on this, because in the end the distinctiveness of limitarianism lies only in matters of policy design, but doesn't change the existing philosophical theories.

However, even if it were the case that, at the level of abstract philosophical theories, limitarianism is old wine in new bottles, we still need to explain and draw lessons from the fact that it finds such resonance in public debates. I think that studying this question may tell us something about the task of philosophy, and about the fact that much of philosophy still focuses on ultimate goals and not enough on policies and institutional design.

Here is an example. Why would we think it implausible that there should be a cap on how much we can receive in inheritances over our lifetime? This would be a distinctly limitarian policy proposal, but one that the vast majority of the population does not endorse at present. I see it as a task for philosophers to study whether there are good arguments for such a cap in lifetime inheritance revenue, even if it is an unpopular idea.

As a sidenote—there were proto-limitarian ideas in the history of philosophy long before the post-Rawlsian theories of distributive justice started to come on stage. Together with Matthias Kramm, I'm working on a paper in which we show that there are limitarian claims all over the history of economic and political philosophy: in Plato, Aristotle,

Aquinas, Locke, Marx and many others. It may be more interesting to also connect to that earlier history.

We now have some questions regarding the relation between philosophy and policy, first continuing with limitarianism. Your paper tries to show that limitarianism can work in practice by expanding on an account of riches, the power of material resources, and a cut-off point above which riches should be redistributed. Do you believe it is a philosopher's task to show that theory can work in practice?

There are at least two answers to this question. The first is that I often do stuff that philosophers do not see as philosophy. I don't care about disciplinary distinctions. If I have a question that I find interesting, I will try to answer it. If I can't do it by myself, I will try to find scholars in other disciplines who have other types of expertise and ask them to collaborate. I am now collaborating with a group of sociologists to find out what Dutch people think about limitarianism. At Utrecht University, and I think in the Netherlands more broadly, there is fortunately increasing support for this type of interdisciplinary research. The second answer is that I prefer to do non-ideal philosophy in the sense that I want it to be action-guiding for the world as it is. If that's the kind of philosophy to which you want to contribute, then it is important to engage with relevant empirical studies, to take feasibility questions very seriously, and to think about the changes in policies or institutional design that would follow.

Do you think political philosophy and policy talk enough?

No they don't, and I think it would be good if political philosophers talked more to policy-makers, politicians, and politically engaged citizens. There is still some reluctance amongst philosophers to do so. This may be explained, in part, by the fact that the type of work that some political philosophers are doing is highly abstract, dealing with counterexamples to establish, say, which abstract theory of justice is right exactly. Although such debates may be philosophically interesting, they are not necessarily useful to policy-makers.

Policy-makers have their feet in the mud: They want to know how ideas can be implemented. And, of course, both academics and policy-makers have full agenda's. I also know several young philosophers who would like to reach out more often to policy-makers and others in society, but are simply exhausted after they have done their teaching,

administration and the research that is expected from them. Time is an ultra-scarce resource in academic philosophy in the Netherlands these days!

I do not think that there should be a ‘one size fits all’, however. It is good that there are philosophers like Derek Parfit, and I hope others will judge that it is good to have philosophers like me who do more of this ‘philosophy with your feet in the mud’-type of work. There is the issue, though, that very abstract, almost mathematical political philosophy is awarded higher esteem, which is, in fact, quite similar to how status is awarded in economics. Because we all want to be acknowledged and respected by our fellow scholars, this may create pressure to do work in political philosophy that is situated on the border with theoretical philosophy, rather than engaging with nonideal or policy questions.

So if we then limit ourselves to the subset of practical philosophers who both want to talk to policy-makers and do the kind of work that might be useful to policy-makers, how can we make that dialog as fruitful as possible?

It may be a very mundane answer, but I think this is a matter of learning by doing. So just do it more, take the time for it. Talk to colleagues who have done it a lot, and ask them for their advice. There is, of course, the condition that you should be given the time. Academics have a basket of tasks that often does not include talking to policy-makers. So there is a tension there. But if you put aside this practical concern, I really think it's a question of listening carefully and being sufficiently open-minded and self-critical. I've never actually had the experience that it's unfruitful.

You are quite active in the public debate, talking about parental leave schemes (2015), the funding of PhDs in the Netherlands (2014), and work pressure for academics (2018). Do you think philosophers should engage in political action more often?

This is an interesting question, because you use the words ‘political action’. Do I engage in political action? I do, in the sense that I, for example, recently sent ten tweets commenting on proposals to change the income structure for disabled workers. Is that political? Yes. But it's not political action in the sense of party politics.

Sometimes I think I should be a member of a party and try to work on a better world via a political party. But if you are a political philosopher and you are a party member, everything you do will be seen through the eyes of the ideology of that party. Moreover, I have sympathies for several parties, and talk to people from many different parties. It's different from being a professor in a field like chemistry, for example, where your expertise and your politics will be seen as two clearly different worlds.

But to come back to your question and answer it more directly: I do think that philosophers should use their knowledge to intervene when lies and distorted knowledge are produced or spread in society, or when they have knowledge or ideas that can contribute to a higher-quality democratic process, or to addressing urgent societal challenges. If we have that broader understanding of 'political action', then yes, I do think more of us should engage more often in political action.

You published your recent book in open access. Why was that?

When I received the contract already quite some years ago, it was not possible to publish open access with the prestigious academic publishers. That has changed now. Back then, I had to choose between submitting it to an academic press or publishing it open access: A trade-off between the prestige and a bit of royalties, versus accessibility. Around the time I had to make that decision, I was teaching a course in South Africa, where I was also supervising a PhD student, Ina Conradie. I asked Ina what she thought of these options, and she said open access would help her much more, both as a scholar and as a teacher. We shouldn't forget that there are huge inequalities in access to books. Some of the new generations of Black students in South Africa are simply poor—so how can they afford books? Now I get emails from people all over the world saying that they read the book and that it helps them. There are even scholars from Peru who want to translate it in Spanish, which is something that they can do with this open access book, since it's published under a CC BY 4.0 Creative Common licence, which implies that no rights need to be cleared for reproduction or translation. These results are very satisfying to me. And in the end it's only fair: we are paid by taxpayers' money, so our work should be open access.

What advice would you give to graduate students aiming to pursue an academic career in political philosophy?

Do a minor in empirical social sciences! It doesn't really matter whether it's sociology, politics, or economics: You should learn how empirical research is done. I also think it makes you more modest about what you can do as a political philosopher. In many questions in political philosophy, the arguments have empirical assumptions. But philosophers who are untrained to read empirical research, are at risk of either working with hypothetical empirical claims, or else cherry-picking those studies from the empirical literature that fit their personal views best.

Also, if you want to arrive at all-things-considered judgments, you have to find out which reasons or objections are most powerful, and that may involve reading up on empirical studies. For example, there is quite a large literature in political philosophy on basic income—the institutional proposal that every citizen should receive a regular unconditional income, independent of willingness to work or any other criterion. But several empirical scholars have argued that there is a trilemma: either the level of basic income is below the poverty line, or funding the basic income is financially unsustainable, or the basic income cannot be fully universal or unconditional. That is where the action is at this point in time in this literature. If you are a philosopher interested in basic income and can't engage with those studies, then you are relegating yourself to the margins of those debates.

A second word of advice is for PhD students who would like to stay in academia, no matter what. I'd like to tell them that if philosophy doesn't work out, there are always other options. We tend to believe that if you do a PhD, there's one route: only an academic job would make you happy. And that's really not true. I know an example of someone who started working for a Ministry after her postdoc, and initially resented that. She had hoped to find a job in academia, but it didn't work out. After two months working at the Ministry, she said she would have left academia much earlier if she had known how much fun it actually was.

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