How much is enough? Money and the Good Life – A Critical Philosophical Reflection

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1. Introduction

The role of the government towards its citizen is a topic of never-ending argument in societies across the world. Specifically, the question about the role of the state in implementing the "good life" for the people is an old debate in liberal theories that has already been discussed by ancient philosophers like Cicero or Aristotle. More recent thinkers, proponents of liberal autonomy Like John Stuart Mill and 'liberal virtue' theorists such as William Galston, have popularized the view that the good life can only be one that is freely chosen and developed by the people. Immanuel Kant, on a similar note, stated that a society should not be organized according to principles already encompassing a specific notion of the good life that is consequently imposed on the people.

While nowadays most modern, Western societies follow a rather liberal path and uphold governments aiming at taking a neutral stance towards the way people chose to live their private lives, such an approach is not without its critics. Two of them are Robert and Edward Skideslky. In 2012, the British economists and philosophers published a book called *How much is enough? Money and the good life,* in which they explore the idea of the good life and how capitalism might have been the key to achieve it, but now distracts us from making the good life a priority. Skidelsky and Skidelsky doubt the whole concept of a "neutral state" and want governments to take an active role in advancing the good for all citizen. As a consequence, the authors present a number of policies that states should implement to edge Western societies towards the good life as defined by them.

In my thesis I will take the Skidelskys' work as a starting point to discuss how the good life should be implemented and whether the state should be a judge in this matter. Specifically, I will answer the question stated thusly:

Should the state be allowed to make decisions about what its citizen need and what they should not have to live a good life, and enforce policies based on that in the way proposed by Skidelsky and Skidelsky in their work "How much is enough? Money and the good life"?

The problem presented above is one of utmost relevancy and it remains one as long as people organize themselves jointly in societies and nations with a common, ruling institution. The responsibilities and limits of a state need to constantly be challenged and scrutinized by its citizen to ensure the personhood of others is preserved. The question about the role of the state and the justifiability of imposed policies is specifically pressing in times of crisis and exceptionality where the well-being of the general public is acutely threatened. The current times are a good example of this. Governments all over the world have introduced drastic measures in the beginning of 2020 as a response to the global spread of the COVID-19 virus. Thereby, the governments have severely cut basic rights and freedoms with the justification that this was necessary to keep people healthy. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic is just one example. Many western states like Germany or Belgium have far-reaching redistribution systems and progressive taxation to achieve a more equal society. Thereby, the governments make decisions about how much certain groups of people should have or not have. Some people might find this unfair. On the other hand, there are increasingly many people who feel left behind by their government in the current capitalist system. Their sentiments are fueled by an increasingly volatile environment associated with grand trends like globalization and digitalization or automation. Are those people right when they demand a state that takes a more active stance to lead people away from a capitalistic system, they believe to be harmful and unjust?

In this paper, I will argue in favour of the liberal concept of state neutrality and against the Skidelsky's vision of a government that actively promotes a certain conception of the good life by implementing policies that nudge people towards a more "moderate" and "ethical" lifestyle and, in the process, determines what its citizen need and not need to live a decent life. To this end, I will first give a brief overview of *How much is enough? Money and the good life* in the second chapter of this thesis, presenting the main points that Robert and Edward Skidelsky put forward. The focus will be on the last chapter of the book, chapter seven, in which the authors outline practical suggestions for the implementation of the good life as envisioned by them. Chapter two of this paper will also serve as an entry point to my research question, which I will discuss in depth in the next chapter, chapter three.

Chapter three constitutes the main part of my thesis. In my discussion I will focus on arguments from a liberal point of view and, from there, consider different arguments that the Skidelskys' did not consider or did not consider sufficiently, as well as potential counter arguments. The questions of whether it is generally feasible to make a clear cut-off point between wants and needs and whether it should be the same for all people regardless, will also enter the debate as they are necessary presuppositions for the Skidelsky's argument. However, they will not be the focus of my critique.

In the light of my findings I will then evaluate the Skidelsky's proposed roadmap to achieve their vision of the good life in chapter four. I will highlight some strong aspects and develop my criticisms. Finally, I will also present my preferred alternative to the Skidelsky's needs-based approach, namely the capability approach as interpreted by Ingrid Robeyns.

In chapter 5 I will summarize the main arguments I used to defend my thesis in an overall conclusion and include a final appeal to the reader.

2. Overview over "How much is enough? Money and the good life"

2.1 Introduction

The Skidelskys' work is organized in seven chapters, all with distinct topics and building upon each other. The book's argument can be split into three components – conditional on having reached the point where the good life is possible (one) and conditional on that the good life is universally desirable (second), the roadmap proposed to get there can indeed be executed (third).

2.2 Part 1: The good life is possible

The authors devote the first chapter of their book to demonstrating how the forecast made by Keynes in the 1930s failed to become true and what the reasons for this are. Working hours apparently have not decreased as much as Keynes expected. In the European countries the average working hours have decreased slightly on average. However, much less than expected by Keynes. In the US working hours have not decreased. Potential reasons raised by the authors for why this is the case are, that wants are relative rather than finite or absolute. People apparently consider their wants in relation to their environment and capitalism allows them to chase ever higher levels of material wealth. Additionally, Keynes took work as generally unpleasant. However, there are many people who are intrinsically motivated to work and honestly enjoy what they are doing for the sake of it.

Chapter two presents capitalism as a kind of Faustian bargain. The establishment of capitalism was necessary to incentivize humans to reach a level of productivity that would allow the satisfaction of basic needs, by catering to primitive human characteristics like jealousy and greed. According to the authors, the problem lies in the fact that despite having reached the desired abundance, humans are now not able to enjoy the fruits of their work, due to the negative habits capitalism has entrenched so deeply into us that we cannot turn away from them anymore now. We keep benchmarking with others and their possessions.

2.3 Part 2: The good life is universally desirable

Chapter 3 now argues that this human desire for ever more, presented in chapter two, is wrong. In doing this the authors refer back to pre-modern wisdom, occidental and oriental. Already classical philosophers recognized how human wants are insatiable but also the importance of limiting them to needs anyway. Supposedly such a virtuous way of thinking has been lost in modern, liberal, capitalistic systems, where more of any good is generally considered positive.

Chapters four and five evaluate two prominent critiques to the economic growth mantra of recent years. Many are of the opinion that chasing economic growth does not only fail to increase people's happiness but is additionally worryingly harmful to the environment. The authors recognize that both opinions might very well have something to them but go on to emphasize how both of them seemingly fail to capture the real problem, which is that endless growth in itself is senseless. Happiness, as the authors see it, is also just one dimension of human life. Additionally, they highlight how there is no evidence for a definitive correlation between wealth and happiness. Over the last half century, the economy has grown considerably. However, overall happiness has not improved. The Skidelsky's dismiss environmentalism as a possibility to question the pursuit of economic growth. They argue that it is based on too little data and faulty discount rates that are applied. Moreover, they criticize that environmentalists would not put enough thought to the fact that species evolve, and nature has the ability to balance itself.

2.4 Part 3: The good life is achievable (roadmap to the good life)

Chapter six, finally, is devoted to outlining what constitutes the "good life". The authors identify seven "basic goods" which supposedly allow people to live well. An important aspect is that these goods are indispensable, sui generis, universal, and final at the same time. The goods are leisure, friendship, personality, harmony with nature, health, respect, and security.

Chapter seven introduces practical suggestions for implementing the good life. The authors propose specific state policies aimed at moving society away from insatiability or the limitless desire for wealth. To achieve this, the state needs to address issues of power politics and inequality, specifically in the working environment. In this context Skidelsky and Skidelsky propose the following initiatives: progressive taxes on financial derivatives and consumption, the sharing of work, an imposed limit to advertising, and a basic universal income. Further, the authors suggest that policies should be realized on a local rather than a global level, to allow individual countries to develop at their own pace.

2.5 Issue of discussion

According to the Skidelskys, Western societies of today are wealthy enough to enable us to lead a carefree and spirited life without having to slave away at work nearly as much as we do. All we must do is curb our insatiability for wealth and strive for the "true" values of the good life. The authors criticize that today's liberal, capitalistic system as it expresses itself in countries like the United States or the United Kingdom, makes us lose focus of what we actually *need* to live a good live and, instead, fosters our insatiable, material *wants*. In the Skidelsky's view, consumers today ignore ancient Western and Eastern wisdom: Premodern philosophers taught that the way to a good life does not lie in a pursuit of money for its own sake. Instead, money should only be a tool, a means to an end, and we should be satisfied with "enough" or "sufficient" materials goods, rather than striving to accumulate more of them.

As a consequence, the authors present a number of policies that the state should implement to edge Western societies towards "the good life" as defined by them. Two basic underlying assumptions of their approach are that it is generally possible to make a cut-off point between people's wants and the things they really need and to make the same general cut-off point for all people. Beyond that, a necessary presupposition would be that specifically *the state* should be allowed to make a decision about what its citizens really need for the good life and what they should not have, and implement

necessary policies based on that. This, however, is something I would like to challenge and discuss further.

Let us, as an example, look at one of the policies the authors recommend Western states to implement. Since Skidelsky and Skidelsky see conspicuous consumption as the primary driver for overwork, they propose a policy specifically aimed at lowering the pressure to consume, namely a progressive consumption or expenditure tax. This tax should replace the currently prevalent income tax. It would exclude items for everyday life such as groceries while conspicuous consumers buying, for instance, a luxurious car or a second house, would face heavy taxes on those purchases. Such a tax would further be scaled progressively, where levels of taxation change according to how necessary items are. Most people would probably agree that a fifth car or a private jet are items barely anyone truly needs. However, the more fundamental question of what gives the state the right to decide what people really need and what they should rather not have, remains. Are needs and wants not both ultimately subjective and dependent on the respective individual and his or her specific circumstances? Isn't there too much of a risk that people would perceive state policies like the one presented above as overly paternalistic or simply unfair and would respond with disobedience or avoidance? Why should the state not allow for different conceptions of the good life and stay neutral?

3. Main part: Discussion of research question

3.1 Introduction

In the following I will defend my afore mentioned thesis that the state should not make decisions about what its citizen need and what they do not need to live a good life, and enforce policies based on that. In doing this, I will focus on arguments from a liberal point of view and pay close attention to arguments that have not been considered by the authors. I will furthermore take into account and react to important counter arguments to my position.

To answer the question whether the government should be responsible for implementing the good life and decide what people need, we firstly need to answer two more fundamental questions which build up to this one. The first one is, whether it is at all possible to make a clear cut-off point between peoples' wants and needs. If decided that it is, the next question then needs to be whether it is also possible to make a cut-off point that is the same for all people.

3.2 Making a cutoff point between wants and needs

The Skidelskys are of the opinion that we can differentiate clearly between wants and needs. In fact, they are convinced that one of the main reasons why Keynes's forecast, which he made in his famous article from 1930 was faulty, because he failed to differentiate between wants and needs (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). According to the Skidelskys, needs are "the objective requirements of a good and comfortable life and are finite, while wants are psychic and "infinitely expandable" (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). Looking back in the history of philosophy, it becomes clear that the differences between wants and needs are occupying philosophers since a long time ago. Already ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle highlighted the importance of limiting wants to needs (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). This means, that they were necessarily also convinced that it is possible to make a cut-off between the two.

Many influential philosophical accounts of what constitutes normatively salient needs are more recent. Harry Frankfurt (1984), for instance, differentiates needs where a person will be harmed by being denied this need from ones where this would not be the case. In his opinion, only needs which have to be fulfilled for a person not to be harmed, are needs in the true meaning of the word and with the respective moral weight. A similar approach is followed by David Wiggins (2013) who further develops the "harm-concept" by describing different magnitudes of harm resulting from unfulfilled needs. Categorical or vital needs, to him, are the ones that matter morally. He defines them as those that are inescapable and without which an individual would fail to flourish or be seriously harmed. David Miller (1999, 2007) agrees with Diggins conceptually and characterizes needs as conditions which have to be met for an individual to not experience harm. Additionally, he differentiates between basic and societal needs, with the latter applying only to a specific society. Len Doyal and Ian Gough (1991) on the other hand, define needs as universally applicable prerequisites for an unimpaired involvement in any way of life. An approach in which needs are defined through social tasks is followed by David Braybrooke (2014). He recognizes parent, citizen, worker, and householder as the fundamental roles that exist in a society and, consequently, regards basic needs as the ones which have to be fulfilled to satisfy these roles.

While there certainly are differences between the aforementioned conceptions, there also are several common elements which can be condensed to the following: normatively salient needs are those without which fulfillment an individual cannot reach important human goals such as performing in social groups or as human agents or promoting human advancement (Brock and Miller, 2019). I am, therefore, concluding that it is possible to specify a number of widely recognized and entrenched needs which are fundamental enough to consistently distinguish them from wants or desires. However, a danger that should be considered when defining a cut-off point between wants and needs that can universally be agreed upon is, that such an account is reduced to something too generalist and abstract to be practically applicable or useful. Resources like food and water, without which

humans cannot survive, might count as uncontroversial needs. However, this observation is not enough to draw meaningful policy implications from it.

3.3 Making a cutoff point between wants and needs that is the same for all people

Even if there is a way to distinguish between people's wants and what they really need, can we make a justifiable cut-off point that is the same for all people? The Skidelskys believe this, since they propose an allegedly universally desirable version of the good life based on a set of universally applicable basic goods. However, can we really – sensibly – come up with an objective, robust list of basic needs for all people, considering the great variety that exists between and within societies?

Human beings can claim to have a wide variety of diverse, sometimes conflicting needs. Looking at progressive western cultures we can observe that many things, for example access to the internet or central heating, have evolved from being only preferences or desires to being considered basic needs whose fulfillment is socially expected. What people claim they need does not only change with time and (technological) progress but also with people's age, their location and other personal circumstances. A teenager in Amsterdam would probably say he needs technological connectivity, while a member of the Maasai tribe in Africa might claim to need cattle for his well-being.

The Skidelskys themselves acknowledge the "vast diversity of moral beliefs and practices" (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012) in the world. They aim to preempt criticism by raising the question of how it can be possible to talk about universal needs and the good life in the face of such diversity. Their response is based on two main arguments. First, the authors point out that the existence of many different cultures and moral opinions does not equate to all of them being equally worthy and that it is, moreover, possible to convince other cultures of the wrongness of their ways (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). Secondly, the authors claim that moral diversity appears more extensive than it actually is and that there are several fundamental concepts which are embraced by all societies around the world. This argument is based on the fact that we are all humans and of the same nature, striving for similar things. Often, things we claim to need are not ends in themselves but means to

achieve something else. If a Maasai man claims to need at least four cattle to survive, we need to ask why he would think that and what cattle represent in his culture. In many Maasai tribes, cattle are not only used to produce food, but also to represent a certain status and to act as a currency with which other things, like for example medicine, can be "bought". So instead of saying, this man needs cattle to live a good life, we could also say something like, this man needs health and respect from his community to flourish.

If we reduce concepts enough - to their fundamental functioning - until they are no longer means but ends in themselves, I believe we can make the same cut-off point between wants and needs for all people. However, we would then have to contextualize these concepts and ask what they entail in a certain society, to draw meaningful and justifiable policy implications from them. Something like "Access to infrastructure", for instance, should include connectivity to the internet in a developed Western society, while for a rural African community, this might not be a necessity.

3.4 Should the state promote a certain conception of the good life and implement policy based on that?

After having concluded that, in a purely theoretical or conceptual way, it is possible to distinguish wants from needs and to draw the same, separating line for all people, I will now look at who could be in a position to justifiably make such decisions. Should the state be allowed to decide about what its citizen need and enforce policies based on that? To make a point, I will focus on arguments from a liberal point of view and ask if we can justify not allowing for different, reasonable conceptions of the good life, like the Skidelskys propose.

Liberalism is not a single perspective but encompasses a great variety of viewpoints. Proponents of liberal theories can range from limited welfare state supporters to market anarchists. However, what unites all of them is a shared belief in economic freedom, personal liberty, and a skeptic stance towards state power (O A 2019). Two important liberal concepts are the harm principle and that of state neutrality. Neutrality, of course is a vague term. I will interpret it as meaning something

encompassing a compatibility with competing views, a right impartiality, or a principle enforcing fairness and constraining dogmatism (Rudisill 2000).

Considering the scope of this paper I am focusing on the liberal philosophers John Rawls and John Stuart Mill here. Both have developed prominent accounts of the neutrality of the state and its justification. Both were convinced, as is also widely accepted, that in a modern state there is a great variety of reasonable and actually held conceptions of the "good life". This realization, together with a rejection of coercive force and a spirit of tolerance implies that the legitimacy of a progressive state is dependent on being accepted by a diverse citizenry. Because of experiences, natural human idiosyncrasies and other factors, we vary in what we value and value things differently due to our diversity (Rudisill 2000). Liberal thinkers like Mill and Rawls take as a given that human affairs are characterized by matters in which either there can be more than one right judgement, there is no right or wrong judgement, or there is a significant amount of uncertainty. It follows, consequently, from this condition that political theories should aim at neutrality, even if this cannot always be realized to perfection. To justify neutrality while avoiding incoherence, Mill and Rawls distinguish between different types of values. Neutrality, according to them, should be employed towards "values of type A", while it is justified based on "values of a different type B". What "values of type A and B" specifically refer to in this context, will be explained in detail in the forthcoming paragraphs. It is important to mention that both Mill's and Rawls's theory are developed for modern, constitutional, Western, democratic regimes.

John Stuart Mill based his theory on the conviction that happiness – understood as autonomous living - is the one supreme good in the world and it, therefore, needs to be maximized. As this is taken as a given, policies then only need to be neutral towards the different ways in which one can achieve this highest goal. All life models are perceived as "good" as long as they support realizing the supreme good (Rudisill 2000). The supreme good itself, according to Mill, is neutral because it is shared by everyone and valued by everyone equally, even though not everyone might be consciously aware of

this. The harm principle is an important constraint in Mill's theory of liberty. It states, roughly, that the actions of persons should only be limited by the state in order to prevent damage to other people (Holtug 2002). Mill's exact argumentation in *On liberty* is as follows: "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others" (Mill 1859). The harm principle, consequently, expresses concern for important liberal values such as tolerance and liberty. It seems very intuitive and is enjoying high popularity amongst liberals. Opponents, however, criticize that not enough thought has been given to the question of what constitutes harm (Holtug 2002).

For Rawls, Mill is not yet neutral enough. Rawls feared that the supreme good Mill defined, could in itself be too controversial to serve as a justification. Rawls stated that neutrality was the expression of justice as fairness, similarly to Mills, but distinguished between types of values differently. He drew one clear line between what he called political and personal values. The former he defined as limiting towards the freedom citizen have in chasing their own ends so that everyone has a fair chance at their own pursuits. To those he counted, for instance, the good of a well-ordered society. This and other political values should ideally be acknowledged by all people. Personal values on the other hand are defined by Rawls as those responsible for the diversity of a pluralistic society, those which serve as ends for the people. Consequently, Rawls envisions a state which is neutral regarding personal values and justified on the grounds of political values (Rudisill 2000). A state basing its policies on a certain notion of the good life – a personal value – accordingly is a biased, non-neutral state which does not treat its citizen fairly.

The Skidelsksys doubt the concept of state neutrality. They claim that it cannot actually be implemented, even in modern, democratic, Western states. To support this view, they mention how the French state would not treat hijab wearers neutrally and that liberal states are not neutral towards heroin (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). Furthermore, they complain that "the principle of neutrality has had a chilling effect on public debate, diverting what should be ethical arguments into sterile

technical byways (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). So instead of chasing after a neutrality that, in their eyes, cannot be achieved anyway, the Skidelskys want the state to help people live good lives. Therefore, the Skidelskys approach can be assigned to the perfectionist realm of theories. Proponents of perfectionism believe that the state ought to help citizen live worthwhile and valuable lives thereby taking side in the conflict between different religious, moral, and philosophical ideals of citizen – discouraging some and fostering others (Clarke 2001). In my opinion the Skidelskys' critique of the principle of state neutrality is rather weak. They devote only a small paragraph - two very specific examples and one personal opinion - to this aim. This does not do justice to the explanatory depth of this liberal principle and its far-reaching influence on modern day policies. Additionally, I do not think that the complaint of the principle of state neutrality having "a chilling effect" on arguments, making them "sterile technical byway" (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012), is an actual argument. It is merely a personal, highly subjective perception or preference concerning the style of public debate with a worryingly paternalistic tone to it. Regarding the Hijab example, several things can be noted. First of all, even if we do believe that the French state violates the liberal principle of state neutrality here, this does not mean in any way that governments in general cannot constrain themselves to neutral policies. In fact, the French state is known to be intentionally less liberal than countries like the United Kingdom or the US. It openly does not aim at comprehensive neutrality but promotes certain ways of living over others. However, one could also argue that the French state does act in accordance with Rawls's and Mill's conceptions of state neutrality, and actually protects the autonomy and freedom of the individual. This would, for example, be the case if we assume that women generally do not freely choose to wear the hijab but are forced – and thereby harmed in their development – by men who simply use religion as an excuse to oppress women. The example of how heroin use is treated in modern, Western, democratic societies is also not a good example if we follow Rawls's account of state neutrality. According to his reasoning, the ban of heroin caters to political goods, for instance that of a well-ordered society, and not to a personal value towards which the state would have to be neutral.

Other notable contemporary perfectionists are Joseph Raz with his work *The morality of freedom* (1986) and George Sher with *Beyond Neutrality* (1997), as well as Vinit Haksar and Steven Wall. Raz, for instance, argues that the autonomy of the people could actually be reduced if the state maintains a neutral stance towards different ideals of the good. His reasoning for this is that, supposedly, many forms of life which are perceived as desirable by the people, require the state's support to sustain. Without them, citizen would be left with a limited palette of options and therefore not be able to make truly autonomous choices (Jennings 2009). In my opinion, this presupposes a too radical form of state neutrality since it is one that disregards the harm principle and one that is not promoted by Rawls and his aforementioned distinction between personal and political values. It cannot generally be suggested that the amount of valuable choices available to citizen is reduced below a threshold necessary for true autonomy, unless the state actively advances what it perceives as "good". I do not see sufficient evidence for this to find Raz's argument convincing.

To the liberal argument which stresses the value of personal autonomy and how it is maximized by a neutral state, critics have responded by stating that there is no sound justification as to why personal autonomy should be supreme to all other goods (Jennings 2009). Personally, I believe that a high degree of personal autonomy is a necessary precondition for the implementation of any other "good". John Stuart Mill famously argued in his *On liberty* that "Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest." (Mill 1859) In my opinion, a state aimed at promoting "the greater good" or the "best for all" is too vulnerable to excessive paternalism and destructive ideology, even if it is informed by a sound understanding of the good. If we accept the fact that the human nature is diverse, and that people of sound mind appreciate conflicting but equally worthy values, minorities or individuals will always suffer under such a regime. Naturally, the individual can voluntarily put the good of society above his own subjective interests, but in doing so he is exercising his individual freedom. Political coercion, which places the collective above the individual, violates this freedom.

Limits on the power of states to advance a specific conception of the good can also be justified through the right to ethical independence. According to this line of reasoning, the government should not make moral rulings because this would override individuals' own ethical judgements. Out of respect for the individual ethical independence, it needs to be impartial towards the good. Ronald Dworkin famously put forward this argument for a fundamental right to ethical independence, in contrast to a special right of religious freedom (Laborde 2017).

A more indirect argument against the government implementing a certain conception of the good life is based on the psyche of humans. This phenomenon is often called the endorsement constraint and it states that political interventions which force or direct the population to actions or aspirations that they do not appreciate, are counterproductive. The idea is that a relationship or action must emerge from the inside in order to be value adding to one's life (Wall 2017). Religious worship is a good example to illustrate this. If one does not truly believe, out of intrinsic motivation and self-developed conviction, religion will not be beneficial to this person's life.

3.5 Conclusion

I have argued that it is generally possible to differentiate between fundamental, primary needs which have to be fulfilled for a human being to flourish in life and wants. I have further come to the conclusion that it is possible to make the same cut off between wants and fundamental needs for all people, however, only on a high, abstract level. Humans are biologically the same and there are universal characteristics of the human nature which make people from different cultures value similar things, like for example health or social status. However, these concepts and values need to be contextualized and translated for a certain environment. People live in a plurality of ways, under very different circumstances. A high social status in rural China can therefore mean something very different than a high social status in Western, democratic America.

To answer my main question which asks if governments should make decisions about what its citizen need to live a good life and implement policies based on that, I have put a focus on liberal

viewpoints. In this context I specifically looked at the concept of state neutrality, which is essential to my thesis that the political order should not promote a certain conception of the good over others. However, I also remarked that I do not support a blanket neutrality, but one characterized through non-discrimination and shared reasons. Such constrained neutrality is essential to the plurality of modern, democratic, liberal societies. I understand state neutrality as a crucial secondary principle, which caters to the more fundamental liberal principle of equal freedom. Any social order necessarily restricts some choices and a liberal society cannot be impartial towards fundamentally anti-liberal values. Notwithstanding this, a state should constrain itself to enabling and defending only those fundamental goods that are necessary to freely choose and strive for individual conceptions of the good and leave judgement about what constitutes the best way to live to the private realm.

In conclusion, I think that the state can and should determine certain basic needs whose fulfillment is necessary to enable citizen to live truly self-directed lives in their respective environment. Such normatively salient needs need to be justified through far-reaching acceptance by the citizenry. Furthermore, they need to be constantly challenged and questioned by the public. The state's task, then, is to assure that no citizen falls below the determined threshold, as this would limit his or her ability to live a self-determined, truly autonomous life. I furthermore believe that, when talking about these very fundamental needs which have been reduced to ends in themselves, the state can determine a cut-off point that is the same for all people. However, this cut-off point would have to be so abstract, that further interpretation would be required, based to the respective case, if actual policy measures shall follow. Furthermore, I do not think that the state has the legitimacy or capability to go beyond the enforcement of what Rawls calls political values. It should not implement educational policies that are clearly aimed at more than guaranteeing a basic standard of living, namely at promoting a certain way of living that is simply considered to be more exemplary or ideal than others, for disputable reasons. I would therefore answer my original question of whether the state be allowed to make decisions about what its citizen need and what they should not have to live a good life, and enforce policies based on that, with "no".

4. Evaluation of the Skidelsky's roadmap to the good life and alternative proposal

4.1 Introduction

In the last chapter of their book *How much is enough? Money and the Good Life",* Chapter 7, the Skidelskys make specific policy recommendations to "exit the rat race" and promote their conception of the good life. In the following, I will evaluate their suggestions, highlighting some strengths as well as shortcomings of their ideas. To do this, I will first refer back to chapter two of this thesis and give a quick overview of the policy suggestions that the Skidelskys make. Lastly, I will introduce the capability approach as interpreted by Ingrid Robeyns as an alternative to the Skidelskys needs-based approach.

All of the policy suggestions of the authors are aimed at changing the balance between work and free time in favour of the latter. To achieve this, the Skidelskys identify two main tasks: "To ensure that the fruits of productivity are shared more evenly; and to reduce the pressure to consume." (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). The state has an essential role to play in fulfilling these tasks, through the reduction of working hours, the restriction of consumption through luxury taxes and the introduction of an unconditional basic income. Further, the state should ensure that schools educate people for leisure and firms cannot deduct advertising expenses from taxable income. The authors claim that, given the level of prosperity achieved, such measures are financially feasible and desirable in the interests of humanity and the environment.

4.2 Universal Basic Income

The Skidelskys propose a basic universal income, preferably in the form of a capital endowment. Alternatively, with experience, they would also support giving people the choice between either a capital endowment or a guaranteed annual income (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). One clear advantage of such a policy is that it would lift all citizen above the poverty line. Additionally, it would enable people who want to spend more time in unpaid, self-fulfilling activities to do so and

significantly reduce bureaucracy. Generally, the pressure to work would be lessened (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). However, a universal basic income also entails significant risks to the general standard of wellbeing and the progression of society. The most common criticism is probably that such an income could incentivize people to not seek jobs and make work seem optional. Such a development would then aggravate another problem which opponents often see, namely the cost of financing such a program. Do we really, long-term, have the financial means and a working population willing enough to fund a universal income for all? Lastly, many economists also see the risk that an increase in demand for goods and services due to the basic income could trigger an inflation and there would then not be an actual increase in the standard of living, due to inflated prices (Rajwanshi 2020).

4.3 Progressive consumption tax

The Skidelskys see the pressure to consume as one of the main reasons why people work so much, which is why they aim to reduce it by means of a progressive consumption tax. The two main advantages they see in such a tax are that it could reduce "positional competition in consumption and increase saving for retirement" (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). Additionally, it could also help fund a universal basic income. On the other hand, one must acknowledge that even if the idea was supported by a sufficient number of people, the transition from an income tax to a consumption tax scheme would be fairly complex and costly as it would have to avoid penalising existing asset holders who would otherwise be re-taxed if they tried to spend assets already taxed through income tax. The difficulty of the transition might, however, be one of the few significant counter arguments. There is much agreement among economists, that a progressive consumption tax would be more efficient, simple and leading to greater economic equality than our current income tax schemes. A major strength of a consumption tax system is that it leaves savings untouched and also provides greater incentive for firms to invest (Grinberg 2006).

4.4 Reducing Advertising

The Skidelskys see the pressure to consume “inflamed by advertising” (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). To reduce the, in their eyes, harmful and excessive advertising, the authors propose to disallow companies to write off their advertising costs as business expenses. The Skidelskys believe that this would make firms cut down on their advertisement and would particularly affect luxury goods with weak links to needs, while necessities require no promotion for people to buy them and would therefore not be affected (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2012). Such a measure undoubtedly depicts a strong restriction of advertising and would most certainly result in a significant decrease of advertisement by companies. However, it could give particularly large and wealthy companies an unfair advantage as they could end up being the only ones who can still afford to place ads. Furthermore, such a policy could also be to the disadvantage of particularly lower income consumers. Many services and applications are only “free” because they are funded through advertisements. If providers of such services and apps do not find enough firms willing to pay for advertisements on their platforms anymore, the consumers will have to pay instead. Lastly, advertising currently is a massive industry providing millions of jobs and billions of revenues and if it collapses, replacements have to be found to keep people busy and to sustain enough wealth to finance social welfare initiatives.

4.5 Conclusion

Even if the authors’ policy suggestions could be enforced and even if they were as effective as the authors claim in reducing consumption – which I doubt – a more fundamental reservation remains; As sensible as individual moderation may be, this assumption is naive. After all, the capitalist world does not live in prosperity because it secured it on this kind of imperishable level, but because it produces it anew year after year. If we were to stop doing so arbitrarily, not only would we no longer participate in structural change, but we would not be able to live very long from the prosperity we have achieved to date. Soon the markets would be empty, the houses and streets would crumble, the technology would become obsolete, technical progress would be lacking. At least today's level would have to be produced anew every year, which is hardly possible without a correspondingly high level

of labour productivity; at the very least, the basic income for all could hardly be paid without a corresponding level of efficiency. The Skidelskys are also subject either to the fallacy that one could get out of the growth economy and have only advantages from it, or to the illusion that we have reached the point where robots can do the work.

But economics is not just a game that you can stop at a certain level. It is a constant struggle with quite different outcomes, which do not always have to be as successful as they are today. The older world, ethically conjured up by the Skidelskys, was perhaps an idyll for the upper classes. In the present, the situation of the mass of people is materially better, not in spite of, but because of the renunciation of restrictions. The price for greater material prosperity is harder work, higher productivity, exploitation of all technical opportunities for action even against resistance.

Perhaps though, there is an alternative that is more efficient at tackling the deficiencies of modern-day capitalism than the Skidelsky's needs-based initiatives? In the following I will introduce the capability approach as interpreted by Ingrid Robeyns which, I believe, might be able to achieve this.

4.6 Alternative: capability approach

In her article "freedom and responsibility – sustainable prosperity through a capabilities lens" from 2017, Ingrid Robeyns aims to answer the question if it is "possible to lead good lives that are simultaneously just and ecologically sustainable" (Robeyns 2017). In the process, she identifies the capabilities approach as a promising option. Although Robeyns puts her focus on sustainability and environmental protection, the capabilities approach can also be applied in the context of the Skidelskys and their vision of a good life for all. Following the capability approach, the good life is characterized by having access to a set of valuable capabilities rather than about having a set of specific consumer goods. Freedom to achieve well-being is of utmost importance and it is understood as people's real opportunities to be and do what they have reason to value. Valuable capabilities in this context, are freedoms to undertake valued activities such as, for instance, being able to spend

time in nature or being able to exercise a decent job (Robeyns 2017). The widespread view that we can make our own, independent decisions, is often not applicable when the use of ecological resources is necessary. To change this, proponents of the capability approach want policy makers to primarily focus on capabilities instead of functionings, to give people the freedom to truly make their own choices. If we focus only on outcomes as in the needs approach, we focus on functionings. For example, the opportunity to take on a certain job would be a capability, while actually exercising this job would represent a functioning (Robeyns 2017). A fundamental strength of the capability approach is that it connects the material and nonmaterial dimensions of the quality of life. Another important advantage of it is that, while there are certain capabilities that are acknowledged as important for the citizen, it leaves it to the people to decide how they want to realise these capabilities. The citizens have the freedom to realise them in any way they want, and by means of any functioning that seems fit to them personally (Robeyns 2017).

The capabilities approach is generally perceived as a multi-purpose and flexible framework, with an open-ended and underspecified nature. The framework has speaking for it that it does not exclusively target subjective categories such as happiness or only the material means to a good life. One major limit and also strength of this approach compared to the Skidelskys' needs-based one, is that it is restricted to the creation of basic capabilities. If, for instance, once the state has provided educational opportunities for every citizen that are sufficient to take them over a threshold - however defined - further-reaching aspirations can reasonably be left to the people themselves, since the abilities already attained provide them with good prerequisites for further development. The conception of the good remains vague as, once the capabilities are present, people must be free to decide for themselves how they are to be applied. For this reason, the capabilities approach does not need to be in contradiction to liberalism. The capabilities approach, as formulated by Robeyns according to the more prominent account by Martha Nussbaum (1988), is very close to Rawls' approach and his naming of basic goods. It is therefore not conflicting with the principle of state neutrality, for whose importance I have argued extensively in chapter three of this paper. Among the

core principles shared by all accounts of the capability approach is the treatment of each person as an end, an emphasis on choice and pluralism about values (Robeyns, 2016)). Therefore, the approach allows for a much higher degree of personal autonomy, something which I criticized was lacking in the Skidelsky's approach. Finally, the capability approach would also avoid the problem of the endorsement constraint, which I presented earlier. This phenomenon is the idea that an action must emerge from the inside of a person to be truly value adding to that person's life. Since the capability approach allows for pluralism of values and only aims at creating real opportunities, not at realizing certain functionings, people are still in the driver's seat when it comes to deciding what to do with the created opportunities and their actions will therefore be truly self-directed and more value-adding.

5. Overall Conclusion

In my thesis I took the Skidelskys' work as a starting point to discuss whether the state should be an active promoter of the good life and a judge concerning different conceptions of what constitutes a good life. Specifically, I aimed to answer the normative question if the *state should be allowed to make decisions about what its citizen need and what they should not have to live a good life, and enforce policies based on that in the way proposed by Skidelsky and Skidelsky in their work "How much is enough? Money and the good life"?*

In my discussion I focused on arguments from a liberal point of view and, from there, considered different arguments that the Skidelskys' did not consider sufficiently. The questions of whether it is generally feasible to make a clear cut-off point between wants and needs and whether it should be the same for all people regardless also entered the debate as I saw them as necessary presuppositions for the Skidelsky's argument. In the light of my findings I also evaluated the Skidelsky's proposed roadmap to achieve their vision of the good life and presented my preferred alternative to the authors' needs-based approach - the capability approach as interpreted by Ingrid Robeyns.

I have argued that it is generally possible to differentiate between fundamental, primary needs which have to be fulfilled for a human being to flourish in life and wants, based on an analysis of different philosopher's accounts of the topic. Specifically, I have compared the approaches of Wiggins (2013), Frankfurt (1984), Miller (1999, 2007), Doyal and Gough (1991), and Baybrooke (2014) in more detail and condensed them to common elements, thereby arriving at a widely recognized definition of normatively salient needs. I did, however, also highlight that a risk of deriving such a list of needs fundamental enough to consistently differentiate them from desires, is that it becomes too abstract or reduced to be of practical use.

I have further come to the conclusion that it is possible to make the same cut off between wants and fundamental needs for all people, however, only on a high level, when the needs-concepts are reduced to such a degree that they are no longer means but ends in themselves. I have come to this

conclusion mainly based on the fact that humans are biologically the same and that there are undeniably universal characteristics of the human nature which make people from different cultures value similar concepts, like for example health or social status. However, I have also emphasized that these concepts and values need to be contextualized and translated to a certain environment, to draw practical policy implications from them.

Answering both the question if it is generally possible to make a clear cut-off between wants and needs and also if the same line can be drawn for all people was a necessary precondition to answer my main question asking if *governments* should make decisions about what its citizen need to live a good life and implement policies based on that. To emphasize my point, I have put a focus on liberal viewpoints here. I specifically looked at the concept of state neutrality, which is fundamental to my thesis that the political order should not promote a certain conception of the good over others and at the accounts of John Rawls and John Stuart Mill on this matter. In this context I argued that personal autonomy is a necessary precondition for the implementation of any other "good" and that a state aiming to promote "the best for all" is too vulnerable to destructive ideology and excessive paternalism. Additionally, I argued that if we accept that people of sound mind can appreciate conflicting but equally worthy values, this is not compatible with a government that actively promotes a certain notion of the good. I further touched upon the right to ethical independence, which would be violated by a state not aiming at neutrality, and the endorsement constraint, which holds that an initiative must emerge naturally from the inside to be value-adding to one's life. However, I also remarked that I do not support a blanket state neutrality, but one characterized through non-discrimination and shared reasons. Such constrained neutrality is essential to the plurality of modern, democratic, liberal societies. Any social order necessarily restricts some choices and a liberal society cannot be impartial towards fundamentally anti-liberal values.

Although I was generally skeptical concerning the Skidelskys' three core policy suggestions, I saw the main problem as one of political agency. I would not support a basic universal income based on

reservations concerning its fundability and its susceptibility to exploitation, and I see many issues in disallowing companies to record their advertisement costs as business expenses. However, I do see great potential in a progressive consumption tax. Only here, even more than with the other two suggestions, I am highly doubtful concerning its enforceability, considering the current political situations in the Western democratic countries.

Today, hardly anyone dares to oppose paternalistic measures when they are supposedly aimed at the best: improving the health, quality of life and safety of the citizen and protecting them a little from themselves. The wrong decisions made by parts of the population who stimulate the economy at the expense of their own well-being and safety, seem all too obvious. However, I am convinced that in the long run, even "soft" paternalism rather increases the problems it claims to solve. This is typical of the political intervention spiral. Probably the most dangerous is the psychological consequence of paternalism, which is particularly dramatic in its "gentle", non-coercive variant. The "gentle" paternalism, as promoted by the Skidelskys, pushes people out of their responsibility by subtle manipulation in small, unnoticed steps. As a result, people could be made believe that they are making their own, independent decisions, while they are actually steered into a certain direction and supported in their decision-making process. Something like this would cater to the dwindling ability of the people to take responsibility for their actions and deprive many of the opportunity to directly oppose the state’s interventions, as they would be too subtle for the majority to even notice or recognize as a threat to their autonomy.

People are different, have different values and preferences. Since the state does not yet have complete control over people's minds, prohibitions, complications, rewards and other disciplinary measures cannot change these preferences. Externally imposed measures relieving the people of their own responsibility will, therefore, have adverse effects, if they become too intrusive and openly educational. In contrast to the mistakes of consumers, the consequences of which affect only the individual, wrong decisions and false incentives of governments affect the lives of the broad masses.

Further, the perspective that the mass of subjects is less capable to decide what is good for them than the ruling class is rather naive: it underestimates the short-sightedness and false incentives of modern mass politics. The only security against the potentially devastating mistakes from above, is the privilege for mistakes from below. For this reason, one should not carelessly give the state a monopoly in deciding what is good and what is bad in life.

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