

"The rich should be obliged to give to the poor because they don't deserve what they have."

We exist within a society where the world's top 1% control almost two-thirds of the world's wealth¹ whilst many people lack access to basic amenities. At the surface level, this inequality seems grossly unfair – how can we as moral human beings possibly allow this suffering to exist while we simultaneously gorge ourselves on material comforts?

Many philosophers have noted the need for the rich to improve the lives of the poor, from Adam Smith who spoke of the importance of the 'invisible hand'² in making sure that an individual's self-interest inadvertently led to societal improvement to Andrew Carnegie's 'Gospel of Wealth'³ where he stressed the need for the wealthy to use their surplus wealth carefully to improve the lives of the poor (so that they would become self-sufficient). However, how this help should be given is hotly contested.

It is imperative to first define the contentious aspects of the statement in order to reach a fair conclusion. Firstly, we must ascertain what is meant by "obliged" in the context of the statement – are the rich morally obliged to part with a certain percentage of their wealth in order to alleviate poverty (which implies a degree of choice) or should they be compelled to give to the poor beyond their contribution in taxes (presumably by the state)? The top 1% already bear the brunt of taxation in the UK, paying more than a quarter of income tax⁴; 34% of this is funnelled into the welfare sector⁵ to assist struggling people from all walks of life. It would therefore be unfeasible to suggest that the state impose even more burdens upon the rich (as it would only breed resentment) when the government could alternatively pursue a policy prioritising social welfare.

However, this is not to say that the rich are completely bereft of any moral responsibility. Let's examine Peter Singer's famous thought experiment concerning the drowning child: if a child was drowning and you were the only one capable of saving the child, you would have a strong moral obligation to save the child even if your expensive shoes were ruined in the process⁶. Hence, Singer argues that this moral obligation would not be dissipated with distance; if the child was at risk of death in another country and it was within your means to save the child "at no great cost"⁷ to yourself, it would be immoral to turn your back on the child. As Helen Deffner aptly notes, the "federal structures" that we exist within distance us from our moral responsibilities⁸; while it is true that the rich contribute significantly to the poor (indirectly) through taxation this does not diminish their moral obligation.

¹ Fottrell Q, "The Richest 1% Are on Track to Control Two-Thirds of the World's Wealth by 2030" (*MarketWatch* April 22, 2018) <<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-richest-1-people-in-the-world-are-on-track-to-control-two-thirds-of-wealth-by-2030-2018-04-10>> accessed June 12, 2019

² Smith A, *The Wealth of Nations* (Dent 1910)

³ Carnegie A, *The Gospel of Wealth* (sn 1889)

⁴ "Reality Check: Are Lower Earners Bearing the Tax Burden?" (*BBC News* April 19, 2017) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39641222>> accessed June 12, 2019

⁵ "How Is the Welfare Budget Spent?" (*Office for National Statistics*) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/governmentpublicsectorandtaxes/publicsectorfinance/articles/howisthewelfarebudgetspent/2016-03-16>> accessed June 12, 2019

⁶ Snow M, "Against Charity" (*Jacobin*) <<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/08/peter-singer-charity-effective-altruism/>> accessed June 12, 2019

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Deffner H, "Peter Singer's 'Drowning Child Problem' – An Analogy Analysis"

Secondly, we must establish the most effective way that the rich can give to the poor. It is clear that charity is not the most effective way of combatting poverty: funds are diverted away from humanitarian efforts to benefit major figures within charity organisations (the Chair of Oxfam International was arrested on corruption charges in a massive scandal that cast substantial suspicion upon the workings of other major charities⁹); in 'Moral Man and Immoral Society', Reinhold Niebuhr asserts that charity mitigates the consequences rather than addressing the societal systems that perpetuate these inequalities¹⁰ (especially in developing countries like Nigeria where corruption is rampant).

Moreover, the rich may feel alleviated of their moral obligation as the donation would imply a sort of contract wherein the responsibility of improving the lives of the poor would be transferred to the *apropos* charity. A more efficient solution arises within the 'Effective Altruism' movement which seeks to utilise the available statistics in order to determine how the funds will best be allocated to help as many people as possible. Proponents of 'Effective Altruism' include Bill Gates, whose charitable 'Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation' undertakes a wide range of humanitarian work including providing contraceptives to women in developing countries like India. The philosophy behind 'Effective Altruism' allows the rich to take up a more active role in helping the poor whilst ensuring that the poor receive the maximum benefits.

Lastly, we must tackle the view of the 'bourgeois' capitalists that the statement perpetuates – it implies that the rich are not entitled to their wealth. This assertion is similar to the one held by Karl Marx, who argued that the oppressed proletariat (working class) were being exploited by the capitalists (as the value of the product was greater than the value of the labour)¹¹. Although this statement is not calling for a revolutionary change in the economic system, it still maintains that it is inherently morally wrong for the rich to accumulate staggering amounts of wealth as it increases the inequality gap. Therefore, this statement seems to be advocating for some sort of reallocation of wealth to reduce this gap.

This argument falls apart at the seams when considering the wider economic and moral implications; it shouldn't be considered morally wrong to assert that you are entitled to the wealth you accrue as a result of your hard work (that the capitalist market economy rewards). In 'The Gospel of Wealth', Andrew Carnegie argues that an individual's selfish desire to achieve success and material wealth improves societal conditions as a whole as it leads to new innovations and a better standard of living overall¹². As a consequence, by asserting that the rich don't deserve what they have and that a portion of their wealth should be allocated to the poor, this removes the incentive to search for new innovations that would be beneficial to society.

To conclude, the rich are morally obliged to give to the poor; as moral beings living within society that benefit from the current economic system, the rich have a particular duty to help the downtrodden. However, this does not mean that the rich are not entitled to their wealth – they deserve the fruits of their labour, so to speak.

⁹ Beaumont P, "Chair of Oxfam International Arrested on Corruption Charges in Guatemala" (*The Guardian* February 13, 2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/feb/13/chair-oxfam-international-arrested-corruption-charges-juan-alberto-fuentes>> accessed June 12, 2019

¹⁰ Niebuhr R, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Westminster John Knox Pr 2001)

¹¹ "The Communist Manifesto - Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (*The British Library - The British Library* April 10, 2006) <<http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/21cc/utopia/methods1/bourgeoisie1/bourgeoisie.html>> accessed June 12, 2019

¹² *ibid*

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