

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

Currently 26 of the richest billionaires own the equivalent wealth of the 3.8 billion poorest people in the world¹ - a startling figure that brings greater scrutiny to the values that sit at the core of our system of distributive justice. It is clear that both capitalist and modern socialists urge for a 'just' mechanism of economic distribution but the methods to achieve this vary, with some advocating the promotion of virtue and the maximisation of welfare over the freedoms associated with a neoliberal economic system. Indeed, it is clear that as a genuine meritocracy cannot exist, the rich cannot have sole entitlement to their wealth and thus ought to be obliged to give to the poor.

Social Liberals maintain that a fair society minimises the difference in outcomes for the richest and poorest. As it stands a baby born in one of the most affluent areas in the UK will outlive one born into poverty by 8.4 years², testament to how current gaps of wealth possession have detrimental impacts on universal entitlement to basic liberties. It is on these grounds that Rawls employs his concept of the 'original position'³ by which we are forced to choose principles of distributive justice behind a 'veil of ignorance'. Rawls guarantees that if we were unaware of our social standing, we would opt for a scheme in which we all have equal claim on the goods of society. Effectively, we wouldn't risk being born as a member of the 1% wealthiest as it is statistically more likely we would be born into the 80% of the population who live on less than \$10 a day⁴. Practically it stands that the rich should be obliged to give to the poor as to enhance moral virtue and respect for the rights we are all entitled to. The economist Thomas Piketty acknowledges that although this principle is a "utopian ideal"⁵, his concept of a global wealth tax is a useful tool by which to bring about an incrementally improved distribution system in which our most basic rights are upheld. A system in which the rich give to the poor as a matter of law upholds virtue over vice - promoting morality over greed.

A month after the establishment of the 'Occupy Wall Street' Movement in 2011, 900 affiliated groups emerged in what the Guardian described as a "global howl of protest"⁶ against increasingly entrenched economic inequality. Sandel placed particular political

¹ "Oxfam report: world's 26 richest billionaires own same as total wealth" 21 Jan. 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/20/business/oxfam-billionaires-davos/index.html>.

² "Life expectancy gap between rich and poor widens - BBC News." 15 Feb. 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-43058394>.

³ Rawls, R. A Theory of Justice. (1971)

⁴ "Poverty Facts and Stats — Global Issues." <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>.

⁵ Piketty, T. Capital in the Twenty-First Century (2013)

⁶ "Occupy movement: from local action to a global howl of protest | World" 17 Oct. 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/17/occupy-movement-global-protest>.

importance on this sense of outrage, citing it as a “special kind of anger you feel when you believe that people are getting things they don’t deserve”⁷. Indeed, many attribute surges in populism⁸ and similar “political, economic, and social catastrophes”⁹ to economic inequality, reinforcing the idea that minimising economic gaps would enhance social contentment. Nordic states support the highest tax burdens in the world, with an average of 48.2% of GDP going to taxes¹⁰ - testament to extensive obligations imposed on the rich. Such high redistribution statistics translate to a statistically happier society, with Norway ranking as the happiest country in the world in 2017¹¹ followed by Denmark and Iceland. It is clear that a reconfiguration of systems of distributive justice which see obligations imposed on the rich would maximise welfare - a more harmonious and productive society - whilst ensuring that individual entitlement to rights and virtue are enshrined.

Others would rebuke this argument, asserting that adopting a purely meritocratic system of distribution would benefit society at large. Current economies are driven by the concept of ‘moral desert’ - the idea that we should be treated as we deserve to be¹². In this sense, one should be rewarded for hard work and should be free to enjoy the fruits of labour. For John Locke “every man has a Property in his own Person”¹³ and thus we are entitled to wealth accumulated from our own talents as these attributes belong to us. Any statutory obligation to impose tax on the rich would in this way constitute theft and coercion.

Whilst Rawls would argue that the only way to ensure virtue is through placing obligations on the rich to give to the poor, ultimately this argument disregards the fact that virtue can equally be associated with ambition and maximisation of wealth. Concepts such as the ‘American Dream’ assume economic success to be of the highest virtue and hence obliging the rich to give to the poor would remove essential incentives for work, having an adverse effect on society. Without incentives CEOs may stop working, reducing employee numbers and halting production of goods associated with a high standard of living. Thus, as a matter of general utility, the rich should retain their wealth.

This however assumes that the wealthy deserve their riches and have accumulated it in a genuine meritocracy - something that is not the case due to external or hereditary advantages. From 1990 to 2010 the fortune of Bill Gates grew from \$4 billion to \$50 billion,

⁷ Sandel, M. (2009). Justice: What’s the right thing to do?

⁸ "Rising Inequality & the Changing Structure of ... - Thomas Piketty - ENS." 22 Mar. 2018, <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/Piketty2018.pdf>.

⁹ "2018 World Inequality Report - World Inequality Report 2018."

<https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-summary-english.pdf>.

¹⁰ "Sweden: Where tax goes up to 60 per cent, and ... - The Guardian." 15 Nov. 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2008/nov/16/sweden-tax-burden-welfare>.

¹¹ "World Happiness Report 2017." 20 Mar. 2017, <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2017/>.

¹² "Desert | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy." <https://www.iep.utm.edu/desert/>.

¹³ Locke, J. (1689) Two Treatises of Government

whilst the wealth of Liliane Bettencourt¹⁴, the daughter of the founder of L'oreal, went from \$2 billion to \$25 billion - evidence of how all large fortunes, whether inherited or earned, grow at extremely high rates. Birth is an obvious example of how meritocracy is flawed, with Rawls taking it further by arguing that our assets - our intelligence or physical attributes - are merely a product of our environment. The average salary of a Premier League Footballer is £2.4 million¹⁵, wealth predicated on supply and demand and what society values - the talent of footballers is arbitrary and has no intrinsic worth. If society was to choose to not value footballers their remuneration would plummet. Obliging the rich to give to the poor therefore cannot constitute coercion or theft as, fundamentally, wealth is a consequence of society's whims. Therefore, under Rawls's 'difference principle' it can be asserted that "those who have been favoured by nature...may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out"¹⁶. We should only allow economic inequality if it works to the advantage of the poor, making obliging the rich to give to the poor essential to absolve the moral arbitrariness currently associated with wealth accumulation.

The word count is 1024 excluding title and bibliography

Bibliography

Rawls, R. A Theory of Justice. (1971)
Piketty, T. Capital in the Twenty-First Century (2013)
Locke, J. Two Treatises of Government (1689)
Sandel, M. Justice: What's the right thing to do? (2009)

Oxfam report: world's 26 richest billionaires own same as total wealth" 21 Jan. 2019,
<https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/20/business/oxfam-billionaires-davos/index.html>.

"Life expectancy gap between rich and poor widens - BBC News." 15 Feb. 2018,
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-43058394>.

"Poverty Facts and Stats — Global Issues."
<http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>

"Occupy movement: from local action to a global howl of protest | World" 17 Oct. 2011,
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/17/occupy-movement-global-protest>.

"Rising Inequality & the Changing Structure of ... - Thomas Piketty - ENS." 22 Mar. 2018,
<http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/files/Piketty2018.pdf>.

"2018 World Inequality Report - World Inequality Report 2018."
<https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-summary-english.pdf>.

¹⁴Piketty, T. Capital in the Twenty-First Century (2013)

¹⁵ "GLOBAL SPORTS SALARIES SURVEY 2016." 14 Nov. 2016,
<https://www.globalsportssalaries.com/GSSS%202016.pdf>

¹⁶ Rawls, R. A Theory of Justice. (1971)

Evie Mollitt

"Sweden: Where tax goes up to 60 per cent, and ... - The Guardian." 15 Nov. 2008,
<https://www.theguardian.com/money/2008/nov/16/sweden-tax-burden-welfare>.

"World Happiness Report 2017." 20 Mar. 2017,
<https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2017/>. .