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**Just Inequality**

Throughout the world, there is a massive disparity of wealth. As of 2017, less than 1% of the world’s population holds more than 45% of the world’s wealth (Credit Suisse 21). This statistic is unsettling to most as there is often a subconscious connection between equality and justice. However, philosophers Robert Nozick, Harry Frankfurt, and John Rawls argue that, in certain cases, inequality is not always unjust. To be explicit, I will take just to mean, “acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good” (Merriam-Webster 2a). I will argue that equality is not necessary for a just society by showing equal distributions can limit freedom, create less content populations, and be to the disadvantage of all.

Nozick, in the section “Distributive Justice” in his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, introduces his Entitlement Theory. The first part of this theory, the principle of justice in acquisition, requires the process of how people come to hold goods previously not held (i.e. from nature) is just (Rosen 1156). The second component, the principle of justice in transfer, requires the way held goods are be passed between people is just (Rosen 1157). Only if these two components are violated, without rectification, is a distribution of wealth unjust. In summary, “from each as they choose, to each as they are chosen” (Rosen 1159).

While Nozick proposes a hypothetical in his argument, there are plenty of real-world examples of his principles causing unequal distributions of wealth. Take the story of Bill Gates for example. As a young kid, he followed the principle of justice in acquisition by acquiring knowledge about programming on his high school’s computer terminal, available to all. Throughout his lifetime, be would follow the principle of justice in transfer as he would develop legitimate products—using his justly acquired skill—and sell them to willing businesses and consumers. By doing so, he became the richest man in the world earning major accolades for his incredible philanthropy (Vital). Looking at the subset of users of Gates’ software along with Gates himself, there is a massive disparity of wealth. Yet, if this shift in distribution were prevented, freedom would be squelched as individuals wouldn’t be allowed to purchase what they wanted. It would be no better than if they had no money to begin with.

In “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” Frankfurt proposes his Doctrine of Sufficiency. This doctrine focuses on the harmfulness of comparing economic status between individuals. Instead of looking at what others have and seeing if they have more than you, examine your own condition in isolation (Rosen 1137). Are you content? This should become the threshold of sufficiency for measuring a just society. Frankfurt understands this question is difficult to answer and clarifies that this threshold is not necessarily a “limit” in the sense that any more of something would make you less satisfied (Rosen 1141). Instead, this threshold represents the point at which someone no longer actively pursues more of something (Rosen 1142).

Frankfurt’s doctrine is quite difficult to convert to a practical approach for a governing body of a society. A common economic device in place to try to determine if populations are above this theoretical threshold is the poverty line. However, this doesn’t grasp the principle of Frankfurt’s doctrine. The threshold of sufficiency is not objective to all individuals, rather, it is based on that individual’s preferences. For example, there is a movement, growing in popularity, called Minimalism. These individuals aspire to live with as few material objects as possible (Nicodemus). As a result, their wealth, but also their sufficiency threshold, is much lower than most others’. But this is by choice and no increase in their wealth through redistribution would increase their happiness. Rather, equalizing this just, unequal distribution would diminish the happiness of the Minimalists by giving them more of what they do not want.

To set up “Two Principles of Justice,” Rawls proposes a hypothetical: Suppose the position and wealth of each individual in society is unknown resulting from a “veil of ignorance.” How would we want society to function? Rawls’ first principle requires each person have equal right to the largest set of basic liberties possible, so long as they are compatible with others’ (Rosen 1126). This includes right of assembly, right of speech, freedom from oppression, etc. The second principle necessitates any social or economic inequalities that arise satisfy two conditions: they are to be to the advantage of all (but more specifically, the least advantaged) and pertain to socio-economic positions available to all (Rosen 1127).

Rawls, in the second principle, leaves open the possibility for an unequal distribution of wealth—with a few caveats. However, if we were all behind the “veil of ignorance,” why would we even consider unequal distributions? Just, unequal distributions of wealth occur in the world as it exists now which would not make sense to change even if there was, in reality, a veil of ignorance. Consider the medical profession. In 2016, the median physician salary was $196,380 (US News). Although this salary is significantly higher than the US average of $31,099, it makes sense when considering the cost of additional education is $234,672 (Federal Reserve; AAMC). Even without this high education cost, medical professionals are necessary for society and is worth a disparity in wealth distribution. Therefore, the difference is to the advantage of all and accessible to all, so it would be unjust to attempt to equalize this distribution.

A possible refutation of the first contention could involve a counterexample. Suppose that instead of using the example of Gates, Chuck Conway (former CEO of Kmart) was provided. This man was payed by willing customers and stockholders, but he committed fraud and bankrupted the company (Business Insider). Surly this unequal distribution does not follow Nozick’s principles. Wouldn’t we be better off with an equal distribution of wealth? Surly this is a morally upsetting example, but it doesn’t detract from the thesis which asserts that equality is not *necessary* for justice. Although in this example equality might’ve led to a more just outcome, cases exist where an unequal distribution is more just, therefore satisfying the thesis.

In regard to the second contention, one could argue that an individual may be content only because they are unaware of how their life could be better. I argue that the main principle of Frankfurt’s doctrine was overlooked. Essentially, it doesn’t matter if there is something better unknown to an individual as the sufficiency threshold is *subjective*. Therefore, as long as the individual is content, we should not compare his state to what-could-have-been.

Lastly, for the final contention, one could present a distribution in which a very costly redistribution system, such that total social wealth decreased dramatically could raise the worst-off individual by a nearly insignificant amount. Wouldn’t the Rawlsian approach require the redistribution take place, yet wouldn’t nearly everyone be worse off? Although Rawls tailors his argument towards the worst-off individual, it is my interpretation that limiting his second principle this narrowly would be a mistake. In this case, it wouldn’t be “reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage” and therefore a redistribution wouldn’t take place in the contrived example given.

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