**Nozick’s Wilt Chamberlain Argument, Utilitarianism, and Equality**

Nozick’s Wilt Chamberlain argument in “Anarchy, State, and Utopia” (pages 160 - 164) goes something like this. Wilt Chamberlain was an amazing basketball player, and there was great demand for him by basketball teams and fans. Suppose that before he retired, because of the great demand to see him play, he was able to reach the following deal with his current team: for all home games a percentage of the price of each admission ticket goes directly to him. Fans knew of this arrangement and were happy to pay to see him play. These fans clearly had a right to use their money in that way. As a result of this arrangement, he became wealthy.

Novick assumes that we started with a just and equal distribution of wealth in this example, so it shows how we can go from an equal distribution of wealth to an unequal one through just means. Nozick then asks: If people voluntarily move from a just distribution of wealth, D1, to a different distribution, D2, “isn’t D2 also just?”

While Nozick thinks the new distribution of wealth, D2, is just, I think that it is at least possible to go from a just state of affairs to an un-just state of affairs by just means. We might be able to see this with an extreme version of the Wilt Chamberlain example. Suppose that Chamberlain got greedy and kept raising the price of the tickets until many of his fans were driven to poverty. It seems to me that in this case we might have an unjust distribution arrived at by just means since his fans were happy to pay the larger fee to see him play. (You might say that in this case his fans were not giving freely; if you drive yourself to poverty in order to see more basketball, you might not be thinking clearly.)

Nevertheless, the original version of the Wilt Chamberlain argument shows how we can go from an equal distribution of wealth to an unequal one through just means. (Although some might think that the means are not just in this case since the means produced an un-just outcome, wealth inequality.) It also shows that continuous interference would likely be required to maintain an equal distribution of wealth. Without government interference there will be a tendency for society to move away from an equal distribution of wealth. At this point Nozick argues that the continuous interference that would be required to maintain an equal distribution of wealth would violate individual rights.

In the original version of the Wilt Chamberlain argument, wouldn’t Chamberlain have the right to keep his wealth? After all he didn’t do anything wrong (except for his capitalist act). And the fans that paid to see him play did so freely. Maybe he deserves a little extra wealth for his talent and hard work. But Wilt Chamberlain isn’t a typical case. In many cases where there is wealth inequality there is no apparent justification. In many of cases the person with greater wealth obtained that wealth by unjust means. Given the dubious connection between having more wealth than others and being more deserving, it seems that people don’t have a right to keep whatever wealth they happen to obtain.

Even in the Chamberlain case, why should he have the right to keep that excess wealth? Because he had abilities that few have? He’s already been rewarded for that talent by being recognized as one of basketball’s greats and by having won the respect of others.

What properties might a person have that would make them more deserving of wealth? Being a better basketball player? Being able to run faster? Being smarter? Making an important contribution to physics? Each one of these properties seems like it might make a person special in such a way that they are more deserving of something (why not wealth?). Yet, at the same time, none of these properties seems to have anything to do with how deserving of wealth someone is.

We could come up with a scheme for determining how deserving someone is of wealth (or respect, or whatever). You might get 10 points for having the best mid-range basketball shot in your grade school, 10 points for having the best layup, 10,000 points for making it to the NBA, and 100,000 points for winning a Noble Prize. There are several problems with this scheme. It seems unlikely that we could all agree on the point value of each accomplishment. And even if we did, what mechanism could be put in place to enforce these rules?

You might want to say that the market enforces some such set of rules. But this set of rules comes down to one rule: you deserve whatever you’re able to get. So, a thief would be just as deserving as someone who got their wealth through honest hard work.

It’s starting to look as if no one is more deserving of wealth, to any great extent, then others. I think this will appear more clearly if we look at a utilitarian theory. The following discussion of utilitarianism proports to show that a fairly equal distribution of wealth is the most just. Government intervention is no doubt required for this; probably an income and a wealth tax would work best.

Utilitarianism, in general, is the view that the total good should be maximized for any given group of people. For the present purpose, I take utilitarianism to be the following theory. For a given group of n people let G be the total good derived from wealth and Pn be thegood derived from wealth for personn. Then we can write:

G = P1 + P2 + P3 + … + Pn

We also have that Pn = fn(Wn), where Wn is the wealth of the nth person and fn is a function from that person’s wealth to the good for that person. Although the function fn might be different for every person, it seems clear that the function will increase more slowly as wealth increases (at least typically).

For example, suppose that a wealthy person who loves boating can afford to buy a one-hundred-foot yacht. Now suppose that her wealth doubled, and she was able to buy a second one-hundred-foot yacht at the same time. It doesn’t seem at all likely she would get twice the pleasure from the two yachts as from one. Neither would it make sense to think that, typically, a billionaire is a thousand times as happy as someone with only a million dollars in the bank.

On the other hand, consider someone who has just enough money to get by. After they pay their rent there is barely enough left for food; in fact, a few times a week they don’t have money for supper. Now suppose that his income increased by 5%. That might be enough that he can always afford supper and even have a little left over to buy the fruit he loves. In this case his happiness (or well-being) would have increased by much more than 5%; we might even want to say that it doubled.

The total good derived from wealth is:

(1) G = f1(W1) + f2(W2) + f3(W3) + … + fn(Wn)

For simplicity, let’s assume that the function is the same for everyone:

f1 = f2 = f3 = … = fn = f

For the case of equal distribution of wealth, we have:

W1 = W2 = W3 = … = Wn = W

Then (1) becomes:

G = f(W1) + f(W2) + f(W3) + … + f(Wn)

or G = nf(W)

Now let’s see what happens to the total good when we disturb this equal distribution of wealth. Suppose we take a small amount of wealth, w, from each person except for person1 and give that wealth to person1. We then have:

Goriginal = f(W) + (n – 1)f(W)

and

Gnew = f(W + (n-1)(w)) + (n - 1)f(W - w)

The first term in both expressions is the good for person1 and the second term is the good for the other n – 1 people. Let’s say the function, f(x), is the natural logarithm, ln(x). To make the example more concrete, let W = 10 (for $10,000 or whatever), let w = 1, and let there be 1,001 people in the group so that

(n - 1) = 1,000.

Goriginal first term: f(W)= ln(10) ≈ 2.30258509

Goriginal second term: (n – 1)f(W) = (1,000)ln(10) ≈ 2,302.58509

Gnew first term:

f(W + (n – 1)(w)) = ln(W + (n – 1)(w)) = ln(10 + 1,000(1)) ≈ ln(1,010) ≈ 6.91830558

Gnew second term:

(n - 1)ln(W - w) = (1,000)ln(10 – 1) ≈ 1,000(2.19722458) ≈ 2,197.22458

Goriginal ≈ 2.30258509 + 2,302.58509 =

Gnew ≈ 6. 91830558 + 2,197.22458 =

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A 10% change in the distribution of wealth led to a 5% decrease in the total good.

In this example, an increase of inequality in the distribution of wealth led to a decrease in the total good due to wealth. This is the case as long happiness increases more slowly as wealth increases in the function of wealth to happiness. On a utilitarian theory of justice, an unequal distribution of wealth is un-just because the total good is not maximized. This is true whether or not it was arrived at by just means.

A utilitarian theory of justice doesn’t need to be true for this argument to be convincing; the utilitarian theory just needs to seem to be a correct way to describe the situation.

So, the answer to Nozick’s question: if people voluntarily move from a just distribution of wealth, D1, to a different distribution, D2, “isn’t D2 also just?” is this:

Why think that we can’t go from a just distribution of wealth to an un-just distribution of wealth by just means? Further, the above argument shows that an unequal distribution of wealth doesn’t maximize the good, and so on a utilitarian theory should be avoided.