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And Justice for All: Viewing the wealth of three United States billionaires through three theories
of distributive justice

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Honors Project

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Introduction

Robber Barons. The term is one many Americans are familiar with. History classes did well to teach us about the exorbitant wealth of a select few during the Industrial Revolution, as the economy, and the country's prospects, were guided by a small group of wealthy individuals. What many Americans don't realize, however, is that current levels of wealth inequality have returned to levels not seen since the 1920's, when the Robber Barons ruled (Rabouin, 2019). Indeed, the top 400 richest Americans have seen their wealth triple since the 80's (Zucman, 2019), a trend that has led to the creation of ultra-wealthy billionaires in every area of industry. Even more striking is the fact that, as of 2017, the 400 richest Americans now have more wealth than the 150 million Americans in the bottom 60% of the wealth spectrum (Papenfuss, 2019). With all of this has come a general disagreement over how to address this inequality, as well as disagreement over whether it's even a problem. On the political left, politicians like Bernie Sanders have recently come into the limelight for championing strict redistributive measures for the country's wealthiest members. Some, like Alexandria-Ocasio-Cortez, have even argued that any system that allows billionaires to exist is inherently immoral (Chappeel, 2019). Simultaneously, on the political right, Donald Trump was able to ascend into the highest office in the land, a bona-fide billionaire himself.

Since no real consensus can be found amongst the U.S. population, a theory that describes what is just and what is unjust wealth accumulation is necessary. Luckily, many of these theories, known as theories of distributive justice, currently exist. For this paper, I will be summarizing three different theories of distributive justice: traditional libertarianism, left-libertarianism, and luck egalitarianism. I will then use these three theories to assess the wealth of three billionaires: Oprah Winfrey, Richard Sackler, and Jeff Bezos. Finally, I will end with my

own opinion on what these three case studies can tell us about the current state of wealth inequality in the United States.

Traditional Libertarianism

The first theory of distributive justice that this paper will consider is the theory of traditional libertarianism. As a broad concept, the views within libertarianism are quite far ranging, with disagreement amongst its ranks about how to best practice this theory. At its core, however, is the belief that social and economic individual freedom is of extreme importance in a society (Vossen, Bas, 2019). While strong civil liberties are a major component of every version of libertarianism, these considerations will not be considered for the purpose of this paper, since this paper only deals with distributive justice.

As it's most generally understood, traditional libertarianism considers just outcomes to be those that are arrived at by the separate just actions of individuals (Lamont and Favor, 2017). This means that, in a market that satisfies the principles of just exchange and acquisition, there will be no distributive justice required. All available resources will flow into the hands of those they should because of the market, not in spite of it. Of course, to be anywhere near cogent, this argument must address an important question: what do just exchanges and acquisitions look like? To answer this question, the libertarian theorist Robert Nozick proposed three sets of rules. They are as follows (Lamont and Favor, 2017):

1. "A person who acquires a holding in accordance with the principle of justice in acquisition is entitled to that holding."
2. "A person who acquires a holding in accordance with the principle of justice in transfer, from someone else entitled to the holding, is entitled to the holding."

3. No one is entitled to a holding except by (repeated) applications of (a) and (b).

To decipher what these three rules are actually saying about just acquisition and transfer, a definition of justice in acquisition and justice in transfer is required. Justice in transfer simply states that, when resources or capital are transferred from one party to another, fair and specific contracts must be used. Any fraud or stealing that occurs through the use of misleading contracts is thus unacceptable according to this view. For example, if a corporation that lies about their annual profits and total capital applies for a cash bailout from the federal government, then the resulting loan is unjust. The amount that's given to the corporation will be based on false information, thus making this transfer of resources not in accordance with the principle of justice in transfer.

Justice in acquisition is a more complex idea and borrows some of its views from the famous writings of John Locke. Locke's ideas about acquisition are relatively simple, and state that, given the presupposition that every person 'owns' themselves and their body, a person can gain ownership over parts of the material world by mixing their own labor with it (Lamont and Favor, 2017). For example, the farmer who sows, waters, and harvests wheat from a field might be said to now own that field because they have mixed their labor with it in a significant way. Nozick tweaks this idea a bit in his own writings, and states that one must also increase the value of whatever property we are mixing our labor with for it to be a just acquisition (Lamont and Favor, 2017). In this way, one cannot simply interact with the world around them in meaningless ways and consider themselves owners of said property. Instead, there must be a noticeable difference in the value and usefulness of that property after one mixes their own labor with it.

In addition to the above stipulation, Nozick argues that his own version of what is known as the *Lockean Proviso* must also be adhered to when acquiring property of any kind. The main

tenet of the original theory is that, when property is justly acquired, there must be enough and as good left for others in the property commons (Lamont and Favor, 2017). Basically, one cannot appropriate an inordinate amount of property if this would mean that now nobody else could own any property of equal value. The key modification Nozick makes to this proviso stipulates that we must also view as unjust any situation where the position of others is directly harmed or worsened by another's acquisition (Lamont and Favor, 2017). Under this argument, for example, person X could acquire the property at a dog park and begin charging its visitors money each time the dog park is used. Yet, the amount of money charged might be wildly overpriced for the services the person who owns the park provides. If it turns out it's cheaper for the dog park to stay communally owned, with something like already instituted community clean up days being used instead, then it would actually be unjust for person X to acquire property at the dog park under Nozick's version of the *Lockean Proviso*. Although person X is leaving enough and as good for others and is adding some sort of value to the commons with their services, they fail to satisfy Nozick's additional condition in this situation. After all, the dog park users are now made worse off by person X's new acquisition, as they now must pay much more for a service that they previously worked together to provide one another at a much cheaper cost per person. Overall, the traditional theory of libertarianism put forward by Nozick can be summarized as follows (Lamont and Favor, 2017):

1. People own themselves.
2. The world is initially unowned.
3. You can acquire absolute rights over a disproportionate share of the world, if you do not worsen the condition of others.
4. It is relatively easy, without worsening the condition of others, to acquire absolute rights over a disproportionate share of the world. Therefore:
5. Once private property has been appropriated, a free market in capital and labor is morally required

Due to much of the world already being owned, comments about justice in acquisition and the *Lockean Proviso* will be of less importance in this paper. Instead, justice in transfer will be focused on, as none of the billionaires in this paper acquired their wealth from an unowned common, rather, they were able to accrue it through transfers of resources between themselves and others.

Left-Libertarianism

For left-libertarians, Nozick's ideas surrounding self-ownership of property and resources must be tweaked in order to arrive at a more just outcome. While the rights of self-ownership described above should be protected, left libertarians believe that Nozick's interpretation of self-ownership goes too far, and allows for an undesirable amount of unequal ownership within the external world (Lamont and Favor, 2017). For example, amongst many of the leading proponents of left-libertarianism, there is the idea that just possessing property and or land should not create more wealth for those who possess it (Lamont and Favor, 2017). One could imagine this applying to those that own vast tracts of land as an investment. By just owning their property, they are able to accumulate wealth as the cost per acre of land rises with each year, despite not adding any discernible value to the land while simultaneously barring people from its use.

Within left-libertarianism, there is also the argument that resources which are not the direct result of anyone's choices, and which are necessary for any type of activity, can only be appropriated with some type of large payment to members of society (Vallentyne and Steiner, 2000, pg. 1). While the level of payment differs amongst theorists, the main idea is that some sort of relevant tax must be paid in order for appropriators to benefit less, or not at all, from what they have acquired (Vallentyne and Steiner, 2000, pg. 13). Still, given these concepts, it's

important to note that left-libertarians across the board still endorse strong rights to self-ownership (Vallentyne and Steiner, 2000, pg. 1-13). Left-libertarians believe in strong individual rights, however, they also acknowledge the need for egalitarian measures that recognize the rights of a society as well.

A couple of other key differences can be found between left-libertarianism and Nozick's traditional libertarianism. One idea proposed by left-libertarians Peter Vallentyne and Micheal Otsuka states that people who begin life with less resources, and thus less opportunities for growth and well-being, are the only ones that should be entitled to a significantly larger share of a society's resources (Lamont and Favor, 2017). The reasoning for this argument is fairly straightforward, for by allowing those who were previously disadvantaged to accrue more wealth than others, there is an egalitarian balancing of outcomes amongst the population, without having to resort to strict redistributive measures and weaker laws of self-ownership. Proponents of left libertarianism have also focused on how goods and resources that are initially unowned should be distributed before self-ownership is allowed to take place. For example, the previously cited Micheal Otsuka has suggested that, for a truly strong equality of opportunity in welfare to be achieved, there must be some level of distribution amongst the world's initially unowned resources (Lamont and Favor, 2017). He argues that a conception of equality of opportunity that lacks this type of allowance will only work conceptually, as every person has a different capacity for the creation of personal welfare out of the resources they have access to. Given this, there will inevitably be those that end up lacking the ability to recognize their rights to self-ownership and equality of opportunity, due to their own initial shortage of the required resources needed to achieve these two prospects.

Luck Egalitarianism

The final theory of distributive that this paper will consider is the theory of luck egalitarianism. As a theory, luck egalitarianism prizes a version of equal opportunity within the economic system. For many luck egalitarians, from this main tenet flows the idea that distributive inequalities can only be considered just when they arise as a result of one's own personal choices, or from factors that they can be held directly responsible for (Lamont and Favor, 2017). However, like libertarianism and self-ownership principles, those who argue for luck egalitarianism have disagreed throughout the years on what constitutes as a 'just' level of equality of opportunity. One of the earliest versions of this ideal comes from arguments for a formal equality of opportunity, which stipulates that economic discrimination based upon a person's race, age, gender or any other arbitrary characteristic, is immoral in society (Lamont and Favor, 2017). A relatively uncontroversial idea, the reasoning behind this argument is that, since all of these factors are not inherited through individual choice alone, they should not be relevant in deciding how resources are distributed. One might naturally believe that a just society should give more or less resources to those who 'earn' such designations, so by ruling out individual factors one is born with, this just society can be achieved.

Unfortunately for proponents of a formal equality of opportunity, getting rid of economic opportunities that result purely from luck-based factors is not so easy. For example, a person's economic opportunities and outlook can be severely affected by a variety of other factors they will have no control over, such as: what schools they attend, their home life and the neighborhoods they grow up in (Lamont and Favor, 2017). When factors like natural talent are considered, it becomes even clearer that a formal equality of opportunity doesn't do near enough

to stop luck-based economic outcomes from occurring. While discrimination based on things like race, gender and age can certainly exacerbate the unchosen differences between people, it doesn't provide us with the full picture for explaining variances in economic opportunity.

To resolve this issue, the scholar Ronald Dworkin proposed creating a distinction between what he termed ambitions and endowments in a person's life (Lamont and Favor, 2017). According to his argument, ambitions are those outcomes that are a direct result of one's own choices (Lamont and Favor, 2017). For example, a person who receives a promotion because they have invested more hours into the company than anyone else would be seen as receiving that new resource disparity through ambition, as it was the result of their choice to work harder than everyone else. Endowments, as the name implies, are those things which we have no control over and which come about as a result of pure luck, or a lack thereof (Lamont and Favor, 2017). To use the previous example, a person who is explicitly denied a promotion because they had to take a week off of work to recover from a car accident that wasn't their fault would be disadvantaged due to endowments, as this car accident was the pure result of bad luck and not their own choices in the matter. In Dworkin's view, endowments should not be considered morally relevant in deciding a person's general welfare and resources in society since, after all, they are factors that are not chosen or actively pursued by that person. Instead, economic differences should mainly be influenced by a person's ambitions (Lamont and Favor, 2017), so that inequities in the system are a direct result of people's choices and hard work, not pure luck.

From these ideas' springs one of Dworkin's main arguments within luck egalitarianism, which states that everyone should begin life with the same resources as everyone else, after which everyone will be free to incur unequal economic benefits because of their own choices

(Lamont and Favor, 2017). By structuring society in this way, the thinking is that nobody will be considered disadvantaged or unjustly lacking in resources, as any economic inequalities will be a direct result of a person's actions taken after receiving the exact same resources that everyone else in society also was able to receive. If someone wanted more resources than others, then they would be free to pursue that goal under the same benefits given to everybody else. Likewise, a person cannot justly claim to be in an unfair economic situation under this system since any lack of resources would be considered to be a result of their own choices and not any starting inequalities. This has led scholars like Dworkin to argue that those who choose to work harder, and thus reap more economic benefits from that hard work, should not be required to subsidize the incomes of those who embrace a lifestyle with more free time and consequently less income (Lamont and Favor, 2017). After all, since everyone is able to start with the same amount of resources under this model, any and all economic gains can be reasonably attributed to an individual's choices and efforts, thus making it just to not redistribute after this initial starting point in resources.

Similarly, luck egalitarians have historically endorsed giving out higher initial economic compensations for those with natural endowments that might put them at a significant disadvantage within society (Lamont and Favor, 2017). Under this model, a person born with a rare autoimmune disorder might be considered a candidate for higher initial economic compensations, for without these additional resources, the medical costs to treat their chronic problems would be so great as to effectively shut this person out of the market. Likewise, not treating their autoimmune disorder would likely cause such great health problems for the person that, once again, they would be severely disadvantaged in gaining resources from the market compared to their peers. Either way, doing nothing would result in an assured decrease in that

person's equality of opportunity due to factors outside of their control, making a greater amount of economic compensation for those disadvantages both necessary and just.

In summary, luck egalitarianism operates primarily off of the belief that economic disparities should be the result of individual choices rather than luck. By augmenting the ideas around a formal equality of opportunity, luck egalitarians have traditionally argued that social, familial, and environmental factors should also be included when discussing a person's equality of opportunity to provide for themselves. Without things like an even starting resource point for everyone, proponents of this theory believe that inequalities due to endowments instead of ambitions will inevitably occur. For luck egalitarians then, to create a just system of distribution requires significant equality in where everyone begins, after which people are free to develop resource disparities based upon their own personal actions and effort.

Oprah Winfrey

The first billionaire that this paper will apply these theories of distributive justice to is Oprah Winfrey, who gets a score of 10 out of 10 on the Forbes self-made billionaire index (Ponciano, 2020). According to this index, which ranks billionaires upon their upbringing as well as initial resources and opportunities, Winfrey is categorized as "Self-made who not only grew up poor but also overcame significant obstacles" (Ponciano, 2020). Indeed, Winfrey faced significant challenges in her life before becoming such a wealthy public figure. For example, during her childhood and teenage years, she faced various levels of poverty, an unstable home life, sexual abuse, and teenage pregnancy (Sackey, 2017). Despite this, she is now estimated to be worth around 2.6 billion dollars, making her rise to wealth and power a particularly interesting one for these theories of distributive justice.

As mentioned before, Winfrey was forced to overcome an inordinate number of obstacles before becoming a billionaire. She grew up poor on a farm in rural Mississippi and moved around to live with various different family members throughout her childhood. Growing up, she was sexually abused multiple times due to her mother's long work hours, had to deal with the ostracization that came with being the only African American at her high school, and gave birth to a child that died within two weeks, all by the age of fourteen (Sackey, 2017). Even after overcoming these challenges, there was nothing inherent in Winfrey's situation that guaranteed her becoming a billionaire. The success she found while running *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (previously known as *A.M. Chicago* before her arrival) can largely be attributed to her own talent and hard work, with no large inheritances or powerful corporate connections helping her out along the way. In the intervening years after becoming a national figure by the late 80s, Winfrey was able to accrue wealth through a variety of different self-made enterprises. These included a television production company, a media company, a magazine and multiple books, her own television network, and various roles in blockbuster movies (Investopedia, 2020). Indeed, Winfrey's financial ascent was characterized by entrepreneurial endeavors that couldn't be effective without the talent and self-made brand she contributed to them. Overall, contrary to some of the other billionaires on this list, much of Winfrey's wealth is derived from businesses she created and had a huge hand in shaping (Investopedia, 2020).

Within the traditional libertarian perspective, Winfrey's situation seems to not only be just, but a pristine example for the traditional libertarian that this theory of redistributive justice works. Going back to Nozick's three rules for just exchanges and acquisitions, one can argue that Winfrey hasn't broken any of them. For example, it can be argued that Winfrey has always acquired holdings in accordance with the principle of justice in transfer, as she has never had any

public financial scandals that would indicate she hasn't followed such a principle. No allegations of misleading contracts, illegal dealings, or any other types of fraudulent activities have been reported about her businesses. Of course, one can imagine that she could have broken the principle of justice in transfer through some nefarious means that we, as the public, have simply been made unaware of. This, however, would be unfounded speculation against current public knowledge. While public knowledge can sometimes be a misrepresentation of the full truth, it will be taken as fact for the purposes of this paper, as it's currently all that can be worked with. Thus, Winfrey's endeavors can be said to fulfill the requirements of justice in transfer.

Indeed, for the traditional libertarian, Winfrey seems to have also acquired her holdings through her own volition. Growing up poor with no professional connections, it's also apparent that Winfrey did not inherit her wealth or businesses in any way. She acquired them of her own accord by taking the necessary steps to bring them into fruition. Without the contribution of her skills as an orator and businesswoman, these businesses would not exist. A great example of how Winfrey effectively created her own success can be seen in her involvement in *A.M. Chicago*. After joining the show, the value that was added became so great that the show went from one of the lowest rated to one of the highest rated talk shows within a year of Winfrey's involvement (Investopedia, 2020). After licensing the show, it was subsequently renamed *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and Winfrey was able to acquire much of the wealth it generated. Clearly, Winfrey has added a great deal of value to these organizations. Even though making one's money through effort is just as acceptable a form of ownership under traditional libertarianism as, say, an inheritance (Lamont and Favor, 2017), Winfrey's case still inadvertently supports traditional libertarianism. One could argue that redistribution is unneeded, after all, if someone as disadvantaged as Winfrey can still rise to the highest echelon of wealth.

For luck egalitarians, Winfrey does succeed in conforming to the principles of a formal equality of opportunity. After all, as a black woman who grew up poor, Winfrey didn't belong to any groups that have traditionally received economic advantages within American society. Instead of receiving her wealth as a result of an arbitrary characteristic she was born with, it can be argued that Winfrey in fact had to struggle more to amass her fortune, since she belonged to a group that has been financially roadblocked throughout much of American history.

When the ideas of 'ambitions' and 'endowments' are considered, Winfrey's right to her wealth stands upon shakier ground in the eyes of the luck egalitarian. Of course, many of the outcomes in Winfrey's life can be designated as 'ambitions'. Finishing high school after losing her child, applying herself in college, bringing *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to the forefront of national television, and founding multiple media companies were all a result of her own choices in the matter, a result of her effort to create the changes she wanted to see. One can imagine that, if Winfrey had applied a lower amount of effort during any of these points in her life, she would not have risen to the level of success that she currently enjoys.

The problem, of course, comes when Winfrey's endowments are considered. More specifically, Winfrey's talent for communication and conversation is a huge endowment that she had no control over receiving. Since this talent was something she showcased at a very early age, even winning \$500 for a speaking competition at the age of seven (Sackey, 2017), it's clear she didn't make a choice to receive this talent. This was something gifted to her out of pure luck, something that gave her an edge over others when it came to accruing resources. What really makes this endowment concerning is not that she has an endowment, indeed, all of us have some to a certain extent, but rather the fact that her endowment was what allowed her to excel and

make all of her money later on in life. Without this talent for communication, Winfrey wouldn't have been recognized in college for a job at a news station, she wouldn't have been asked to lead *A.M. Chicago* and she wouldn't have been able to make it into the hit morning talk show it became without her oratory skills. In all these situations, she did work hard and invested a lot of her energy into the success of her endeavors. One can't run one of the most influential talk shows in recent memory for twenty-five seasons by sitting around and doing nothing, after all. Yet, if she didn't possess her propensity for communication, there's a good chance that no amount of hard work on her end would've made her endeavors succeed in the way they did and allow Winfrey to become a billionaire as a result. Under the rule of luck egalitarianism, Winfrey would certainly enjoy a higher level of wealth, but because her efforts were so greatly emboldened by that initial 'endowment' of talent, it becomes unclear whether that higher level of wealth should be to the tune of billions of dollars.

Now, if talents are not considered to be an unfair starting point within a society of luck egalitarians, Winfrey is justified in her accumulation of wealth. Under Dworkin's utopia, it's an equal amount of resources initially given to everyone that makes a society just, and effort worthy of reward (Lamont and Favor, 2017). Since Winfrey was actually born with fewer resources than the average American, the wealth she's accumulated certainly can't be attributed to an unjust starting point in her life. Instead, this wealth would be attributed to Winfrey's choices and efforts. Thus, according to this view, Winfrey is justified in her wealth and faces no moral predicament of redistribution.

Overall, Winfrey would be justified in at least some portion of her fortune under the views of luck egalitarianism. It can even be argued that her only detracting factor, her

recognizable talent for communication, eventually turned from an ‘endowment’ into an ‘ambition’ because she invested so much time and effort in developing the skill. Clearly, Winfrey did not allow this initial talent to wither away or remain unused, rather, she consistently made the choice to utilize it and thereby strengthen the skill as a result. Even though she was gifted with this talent, it was through much of her own volition that she pursued opportunities, jobs, and a career that developed the skill. As such, Winfrey can be viewed as conforming to the ideals of justice laid down by luck egalitarianism. If it’s to be believed that, through her own choice in the matter, her initial talent for communication turned into a recognizable money-making skill, then Winfrey is justified in her level of wealth according to this theory.

Within left-libertarianism, a fairly simple case can be made for Winfrey justly owning all of her wealth. The best argument in Winfrey’s favor comes from the left-libertarian idea that those who start life with less resources should be the only ones allowed to accrue much larger sums of wealth (Lamont and Favor, 2017). As has been noted throughout the discussion on Winfrey, her upbringing was filled with a significant lack of monetary and social support. Compared to the other billionaires on this list, and indeed, most Americans, Winfrey’s childhood allows her to be justified in amassing a significant amount of wealth according to left-libertarians.

Of course, since there is no consensus on what a reasonably “significant” amount of relative resources are, some left-libertarians might still view Winfrey as undeserving of her wealth. While it’s inarguable that Winfrey endured a lot during her upbringing, one could still make the argument, though it may sound cruel, that she simply didn’t endure enough to warrant the wealth of a billionaire. After all, \$2.6 billion is a vast sum of money. If Winfrey’s situation

allows over \$1 billion in wealth, then how much would the former child soldier be entitled to make? Or the child who grew up picking cans out of trash piles for money to survive? One can imagine that these individuals would be beginning life with far fewer resources than Winfrey, thus making them, theoretically, entitled to earn hundreds of billions of dollars. Still, since this paper is viewing distributive justice through a national perspective, Winfrey can be said to be justified in her wealth. There are certainly individuals across the world who were given fewer initial resources than Winfrey, but since Winfrey was given far fewer initial resources relative to most other American children, she fulfills the criteria for this argument.

Winfrey also conforms to the idea within left-libertarianism that simply possessing property, without being involved with it in any way, shouldn't make a person wealthier (Lamont and Favor, 2017). Once again, looking at Winfrey's enterprises, it's apparent that she is involved to a certain degree in their success. Unlike a hedge-fund manager who may buy up a majority of a company and then do nothing to oversee its operations, Winfrey's businesses are built around her brand and personality. Without her involvement, they wouldn't succeed as much as they do.

Overall, Winfrey conforms to the ideals left-libertarians espouse. While some may argue that the lack of resources she was born into doesn't warrant being worth \$2.6 billion, this is an unnecessarily harsh sentence given the relative poverty Winfrey was born into in the United States. By also satisfying left-libertarian arguments about possessing property, Winfrey is justified in her wealth according to this theory of distributive justice.

Richard Sackler

The second billionaire this paper will consider is Richard Sackler. Although his net worth is unknown, he is part of the Sackler family, a wealthy American family that is currently valued at \$10.8 billion (Forbes, 2020). Richard Sackler also has not been given a self-made score on Forbes, but because he is the son of Raymond Sackler, one of the three brothers who founded Purdue Pharma and made it so profitable, he would most likely be given a score of 3 or 4 since he has inherited his fortune but has also helped to increase it (Ponciano, 2020). As the acting president of Purdue Pharma between 1999 and 2003, as well as its co-chair later on, Sackler had major influence over the company in the years leading up to the prescription opioid crisis that has currently claimed over 247,000 lives since 1999 (CDC, 2020). The use of OxyContin, Purdue Pharma's flagship painkiller product, became particularly widespread during this period and accounted for a large amount of opioid prescriptions (DeWeerd, 2019). Given this, Sackler's right to his fortune becomes questionable amongst all three theories of distributive justice.

Despite an aversion to redistribution, traditional libertarians would not view Richard Sackler as having acquired his wealth in a just manner. Importantly, Sackler's actions over the course of the opioid epidemic conflicted with the principle of justice in transfer. After multiple lawsuits and investigations into the matter, it was found that, while president of Purdue Pharma, Sackler repeatedly shunned reports describing how addictive and fatal the drug OxyContin could be (Lopez, 2019). Worse, Sackler's company publicly claimed that OxyContin wasn't as addictive as other opioids, and that it was the most effective way to treat pain. It turns out that both of these claims were patently false and that Sackler knew them both to be false long before the information was discovered (DeWeerd, 2019). Even though the company was fined in 2007 for hundreds of millions of dollars for lying about these aspects of the drug, the company

continued to market OxyContin to physicians and patients as a safe and effective treatment for pain, conveniently leaving out how addictive it actually was (DeWeerd, 2019). If one thinks about the sale of OxyContin as a sort of contract; with physicians, distributors, governments, hospitals and patients, then it's clear that Sackler was intentionally falsifying information about the business and its product in order to receive a larger profit. In this way, the sale of OxyContin and the transfer of wealth that resulted was unjust in the eyes of traditional libertarianism. By breaking the rules set by the principle of transfer, Sackler would not be entitled to any of the resources gained by the sale of OxyContin. Considering the fact the Sackler family made a staggering \$13 billion from the sale of OxyContin alone (Hopkins, Scurria, 2019), it's fair to say that a large majority of Sackler's wealth was unjustly acquired and therefore unethical in the eyes of traditional libertarianism.

For luck egalitarians, Sackler's case for retaining his resources is similarly bleak, albeit for different reasons. To begin with, the outcomes in Sackler's life that can be chalked up as 'endowments' are both more prolific and more pronounced compared to his 'ambitions'. For example, while his educational attainment in the form of a degree and M.D. can be considered a result of his own choice to work hard, there was also a level of luck involved in getting these degrees. After all, Sackler was the son of Raymond Sackler, a wealthy physician and businessman who helped to start Purdue Pharma. It's not hard to conceive that, given this situation, Sackler was highly encouraged to become a doctor himself. Things like educational connections and financial costs for med school were no problem for Sackler, purely because of the luck of his circumstance. Degrees aside, it's Sackler's high-level involvement with Purdue Pharma that places him squarely in the camp of those whose resources have been attained primarily by 'endowments' rather than 'ambitions'. Without the luck of being born within the

Sackler family, there's very little chance Sackler would've been able to assume high-ranking (and monetarily rewarding) positions in the company so quickly. Indeed, Sackler is known to have hardly worked as a physician, opting instead for a role as assistant to the president of Purdue Pharma in 1971, three years before he became a licensed physician in Connecticut (Munson, 2019). The idea that Sackler would've never become president of the company later on, without this initial involvement, is also not too hard to assume. Additionally, Sackler's financial stake in the company was basically assured by birth, making much of the money he made from his ownership in Purdue Pharma an 'endowment'.

Since the idea of an equal resource starting point is crucial for the luck egalitarian (Lamont and Favor, 2017), Sackler ends up undeserving of his wealth for this reason as well. By being born into such an already successful family, Sackler was given an unequal breadth of opportunity and was privy to ownership in the company based solely upon his lineage. As such, the disparity in resources between Sackler and the average American would not be considered just. Even though he did take some direct action that influenced how much money he would make, such as attending college and getting his medical degree, these personal actions were easier to accomplish because of Sackler's unequal starting point in life. In the world of luck egalitarianism, Sackler may still be entitled to a larger amount of resources than others due to his efforts, however, because his current efforts are not extraordinary in any way, they would not be deserving of the billions of dollars Sackler is now worth. It is also important to note that luck egalitarians would be unlikely to condone Sackler lying about OxyContin and might even consider him unworthy of his fortune for that reason alone, just like the traditional libertarian. This section is more to point out that, even if Sackler hadn't engaged in these activities, he still wouldn't be considered justified in his wealth according to the theories of luck egalitarianism.

In the eyes of left-libertarians, Sackler is undeserving of his wealth. Importantly, Sackler did not begin life with less resources. In fact, as the other theories have shown, he was able to grow up in a very wealthy family, one that possessed lots of resources and provided him with a multitude of opportunities. As some left-libertarians have argued, only those who were born with less resources should be able to have a disproportionate amount of wealth later on (Lamont and Favor, 2017), thereby making Sackler's wealth undeserved, according to this view.

Of course, one could argue that Sackler had no choice in the matter. He was born into a wealthy family, yes, but not through any nefarious action of his own. This person could argue that, because of this, redistributing Sackler's wealth for a choice he didn't make is ludicrous. The problem is, Sackler wouldn't have become a billionaire without the circumstance of his birth and the opportunities it provided him. As was discussed in the section on luck egalitarianism, Sackler's success came as a direct result of his connection to the Sackler family. If Sackler had gone off and started his own company, building it by himself with much of his own knowledge and effort, then this counterargument might have some ground to stand on. In that world, it would seem unfair, to a certain degree, to castigate Sackler's hard work because of the circumstances of his birth. However, in the real world, following this form of logic is a double-edged sword in defense of Sackler. If choices are what matters in determining wealth, as the counterargument clearly implies by suggesting Sackler had no choice in the matter, then yes, Sackler shouldn't have less wealth because of his circumstances. Likewise, he shouldn't have any of the wealth he has either, since it was mostly accrued through arbitrary circumstances. Thus, the argument of the left-libertarian still holds.

Overall, under left-libertarianism, it's Sackler's large inheritance that makes his situation quite unjust. Although self-ownership is important, and the left-libertarian would support Sackler's right to own part of the company and do with it what he pleases (within the bounds of what is morally acceptable, of course), it's this incredibly unequal initial distribution that hurts Sackler's case for being deserving of his wealth.

Jeff Bezos

The final billionaire that this paper will consider is Jeff Bezos. As of April 2021, Bezos has been valued to be worth \$196.4 billion (Forbes, 2021), making him the richest billionaire in this analysis by far. On the Forbes self-made index, Bezos has also been given a score of 8, a position defined as "Self-made who came from a middle-class or upper-middle class background" (Ponciano, 2020). As the founder and CEO of Amazon from its inception in 1994 to 2021, Bezos played a crucial role in overseeing the company's rise to a current valuation of over \$1 trillion by 2020 (Palmer, 2020). Given his role in Amazon's development and his upbringing in a traditionally middle-class environment, Bezos seems to have a case for retaining his wealth amongst all three theories of distributive justice.

For traditional libertarians, Bezos is generally deserving of his wealth, although a point of contention can be made. For example, in regard to the principle of justice in transfer there have been instances where Amazon has breached its contracts with workers. Recently, Amazon was recently forced to pay \$61.7 million to settle a recent charge by the FTC that Amazon had withheld tips from Amazon flex drivers (FTC, 2021). Under the principle of justice in transfer, fraud or stealing that occurs in contracts like the one Amazon had with its drivers means that Amazon, and Bezos, are not entitled to whatever money they made by doing this. Still, this is

only one case against the many contracts Amazon has made, meaning it can be presumed that a significant portion of Bezos's wealth was made according to the principle of justice in transfer.

Like Winfrey, Bezos's case serves as a real-world example to the traditional libertarian that this theory is indeed just. Without Bezos's vision and effort, Amazon would not exist. As the company's original founder and its CEO for most of the company's history, Amazon's success is virtually inseparable from Bezos himself. He created his wealth "from the ground up" so to speak, with a relatively small amount of help compared to most other billionaires. Once again, if a child from a middle-class home can eventually become one of the world's richest people, then surely there is already justice in the system, and redistribution is not required. Overall, Bezos can be viewed as deserving of his wealth according to traditional libertarianism. While he has deviated from its rules before, the majority of his wealth has come while conforming to the principle of justice in transfer, and thus, was made ethically.

Within luck egalitarianism, Bezos's claim to his wealth is dependent upon whether his success was the result of personal effort rather than natural talent. For example, the outcome of Bezos graduating from Princeton, as well as his lucrative jobs in tech, banking, and hedge fund investment, could be viewed as either 'endowments' or 'ambitions'. As a child, Bezos was reported to be quite intelligent and a burgeoning inventor (Clifford, 2017). Eventually becoming the valedictorian of his high school, it's clear that Bezos had a substantial amount of natural talent growing up. If one approached his life from the perspective that, without this natural talent, Bezos wouldn't have been able to continue succeeding in life and eventually found Amazon, then one could make the case that his vast fortune was really the indirect result of an 'endowment' in the form of his intelligence and creativity.

Still, this type of argument is hampered by the fact that Bezos did seem to take a large amount of control over his life. Even though he may have been of an above average intelligence, graduating from an ivy-league school and then getting job offers from multiple companies upon graduation, without the help of any network from his parents, does require a certain level of commitment and effort. Most importantly, Bezos's decision to quit a lucrative job, found Amazon, and work hard to grow the company into what it is today are all personal decisions that he himself made and pursued. Since his wealth is primarily derived from the success of Amazon, and Amazon was more or less a direct result of his efforts, it makes sense then that the success of Amazon was an 'ambition' for Bezos. With this line of thinking, Bezos would be considered ethical according to luck egalitarians, as what's morally relevant is a person's 'ambitions' and not their 'endowments' (Lamont and Favor, 2017).

Arguments can also be made for and against Bezos conforming to the idea of an equal starting point in resources. Born to a 16-year-old mother and an eventually absent father (Clifford, 2017), Bezos certainly didn't begin life with any substantial financial privilege. Even though his situation did improve later on when his mother remarried, it can't be said that Bezos grew up wealthy or upper-middle class. As such, while Bezos wasn't significantly disadvantaged like Winfrey, he also wasn't privy to the type of financial privilege that Sackler was able to enjoy. By growing up middle class, it can be argued that Bezos started with the amount of resources luck egalitarians might consider to be a reasonable starting point. However, since many other Americans weren't able to start with this same number of resources, it can still be argued that Bezos had a small financial advantage growing up and is consequently not deserving of all his wealth. This financial advantage can also be seen in the \$300,000 his parents loaned him to help start Amazon (Fabiano, 2019). While certainly not an exorbitant amount of money, it

was crucial in getting Amazon off the ground, and since it was given to Bezos from the pure luck of his parents having that money to give, Bezos's ensuing success with the company can be partially seen as an outcome of inequality as a result.

Overall, luck egalitarians would differ on whether Bezos is deserving of some, or even all, of his wealth. If natural talent and financial assistance from his parents are considered defining aspects of his wealth, then he is not deserving of it. However, if his personal efforts, choices, and actions are perceived as more morally relevant, than he is deserving of this wealth. To take the middle ground, this paper argues that, under luck egalitarianism, he is deserving of a portion of his wealth, however, he is not justified in retaining the full \$196.4 billion he's currently worth, given the aforementioned circumstances that allowed him to succeed.

For left-libertarians, Bezos's situation is a nuanced one, but ultimately, he is undeserving of his wealth under this theory. Although Bezos is entitled to his rights of self-ownership over the wealth he's made, the left-libertarian would take issue with the fact that Bezos didn't come from a relatively impoverished background, as well as the degree of his wealth. By growing up in a middle-class household, it can't be argued that Bezos grew up with less resources than most, but it also can't be fully argued that he grew up with more either. Since it's those who began life with less resources that are entitled to a significantly larger portion of resources later on, it seems like Bezos can only claim a moderate amount of unequal resources under left-libertarianism. His beginning prospects were not harsh enough to warrant a significantly larger amount, rather, because he was given a middle-class lifestyle with adequate food, schooling, and the like, he is not justified in accumulating huge sums of wealth similar to the \$196.4 billion he currently possesses.

The major factor that precludes Bezos from justifying his wealth under left-libertarianism is, to put it bluntly, the fact there's just so much of it. For proponents of this theory, a vastly unequal ownership of the external world is to be avoided (Lamont and Favor, 2017). After all, this is one of the key ways in which left-libertarians differ from traditional libertarians. While the traditional libertarian takes no issue with Bezos's truly staggering sum of money, the left-libertarian can't fully endorse his possession of these resources, regardless of how he received them. The fact of the matter is simply that, if enormous unequal ownership by one individual is to be avoided, Bezos should not be allowed to have the amount of money he has. To put his resource discrepancy into more concrete terms, reports in the last few years have found that, for the average American worker (on a median income of \$46,800) to make as much as Jeff Bezos is currently worth, they would have to work nonstop for 2.8 million years and not spend any money in the process (Merelli, 2019). Such a level of resource discrepancy is staggering, not in the least because 2.8 million years is almost ten times the length of all recognized human history. Considering the fact that this information was created two years ago, when Bezos was worth only \$131 billion, it's clear that this inequality in resources has only increased in the intervening years.

Overall, while Bezos was certainly faced with a greater lack of resources compared to Sackler or another billionaire of similar upbringing, his initial situation still doesn't allow him, according to left-libertarians, to have as much wealth as he currently holds. More importantly, Bezos's unbelievable amount of wealth is unjust in and of itself for the left-libertarian, as it represents an enormously unequal amount of ownership.

Final Thoughts

After judging Winfrey, Sackler and Bezos by these three theories of distributive justice, I believe a few different arguments can be made. To begin with, I would argue that a lenient version of traditional libertarianism is what is currently being followed in the United States. After all, this theory is the only one that even comes close to viewing all of the billionaires in this paper as justified in their wealth. Given its dislike of distribution, it's no wonder that traditional libertarianism would be the theory of choice for a country currently undergoing continual wealth concentration amongst the nation's highest earners. If either luck egalitarianism or left-libertarianism were the dominant theories of distributive justice, there would likely have been some prior reaction to this wealth concentration. While many might decry the 'unfairness' of Sackler's inheritance or Bezos's loan from his parents, there are no legal avenues in the U.S. for redistributing their income based on these factors. Instead, the only significant wealth redistribution that's occurred in all three cases has come when a billionaire has broken the principle of justice in transfer.

For example, although the lawsuit is still unresolved, Sackler and his family have currently agreed to pay \$4.3 billion in a settlement over the opioid crisis (Spector, 2021). This might sound like the U.S. conforming to the tenets of traditional libertarianism, but I would argue it's actually a clear example of the country's leniency when it comes to punishing those who break the principle of justice in transfer. As stated before in this paper, it's estimated that the Sackler family made over \$13 billion from selling OxyContin (Hopkins, Scurria, 2019). If the U.S. was truly following the ideals of traditional libertarianism, then the above settlement would need to begin somewhere around \$13 billion, as all of this money was earned in an unjust manner. Thus, while the U.S. certainly attempts to follow the doctrine of traditional

libertarianism, recent dealings with Sackler and his family have shown that what it practices is a more lenient version of the theory.

I believe another conclusion that can be drawn from this paper is that left-libertarianism is the most preferable theory of redistributive justice. For example, compared to traditional libertarianism, left-libertarianism actually does something to address the continued consolidation of wealth amongst the country's elite. While the idea that there should be no cap on total wealth might sound, in theory, a more just view than the inverse, I believe this tenet of traditional libertarianism has a profoundly negative effect on society. To put it bluntly, wealth inequality in the U.S. has been, and will continue to be, a serious problem. Extreme wealth inequality has now been linked to adverse health outcomes, significant increases in stress, a higher risk of homicide by those experiencing it (R. Frank, 2007, ch. 3) and slower economic growth (Ingraham, 2018). While an extensive study of the effects of wealth inequality in the U.S. is far beyond the scope of this paper, existing research does indicate it's a problem, a problem that traditional libertarianism never seeks to confront. As such, left-libertarianism can be seen as more beneficial for all of society, as it actually recommends keeping rampant wealth inequality at bay.

Left-libertarianism is also a preferable alternative to luck egalitarianism, as the latter can be too overbearing and lead to unjust outcomes. To be fair, I do think that principles seeking to root out purely luck-based economic disparities should be encouraged. A society in which we can attribute most, or all, of one's wealth to the circumstances of their birth is surely not the kind that I would consider just. The problem with luck egalitarians, and the equality of opportunity that many of its proponents posit, is that it goes too far in attempting to remove the inherent luck within a society.

For example, the inevitable conclusion of the luck egalitarian's argument is that a person's ingrained talents are a factor of luck, and thus should not be financially compensated. In my opinion, this argument leads to some unsavory outcomes. After all, one can view the ability to work hard as a type of talent, a propensity for enduring the challenges and rigors of life. How, then, can luck be completely eradicated, if the very essence of a person's personality must now be judged as either 'too lucky' or not? Indeed, it would seem as though the only solution to the problem would be a completely equal distribution of resources, so that not even the tiniest sliver of luck could be allowed to make a difference in one's economic outcome. Not only is this solution incredibly overbearing, as it allows no room for individual choices like the kind Winfrey and Bezos made, it also leads to unjust outcomes. Even if only the obvious luck found in one's talents and circumstances of birth are to be considered, the question must still be raised; who decides what is luck and what isn't? Clearly, some vast bureaucratic mechanism would need to be formed so as to determine what constitutes as luck on a case-by-case basis. This system, even if purely run by goodwill actors, would inevitably result in many unjust outcomes as people's situations are misunderstood by the occurrence of human error and the complexity of circumstance.

Given the extremity of outcomes in both traditional libertarianism and luck egalitarianism, I think that left-libertarianism is the most preferable option. Its ability to take valuable principles of self-ownership and account for enormous wealth inequality allows it to act on a sort of middle-ground. By not swinging too far to either redistributive extreme, I would argue that left-libertarianism provides us with the most just amount of wealth redistribution, as hard work and ingenuity are rewarded while the domination of the economy by a select few is ultimately avoided.

Lastly, if a form of left-libertarianism is to be followed, then the most important thing to figure out is at what threshold we as a society think a person should be limited in wealth. The question thus becomes; at what point does a person's total wealth go from being justified to being vastly unequal? Although a comprehensive answer is beyond the scope of this paper, I would argue that a version of left-libertarianism that caps total wealth at \$5 billion would be the most just. Additionally, this amount would only be attainable by those who, like Winfrey, were born into significant disadvantage and forced to create their wealth despite the circumstances they were born into. One of the main reasons for capping wealth at such a low level is that being worth \$1 billion is an enormous disparity of wealth even when compared to being worth millions, and most people aren't even worth that. To show just how much more \$1 billion is to \$1 million, recent 'visualization' videos have attempted to relate this information in a more digestible format. In one particular video by the creator Tom Scott, it was found that, if a stack of \$1 bills was laid on its side, it would reach the length of a typical American football field at \$1 million, or 360 feet. In the video, he accomplishes this after about 1 minute of walking. To get to \$1 billion, he ends up having to drive on the U.K. highway system for a little under 1 hour and 17 minutes (Tom Scott, 2020). Given this, I would argue that, even if everyone was a millionaire, being a billionaire still constitutes as being a person with a largely unequal ownership of resources. Since most people aren't close to being millionaires, it's clear that those worth \$1 billion and above represent a segment of the population that holds a vastly unequal share of resources. As such, if American society were to adopt the principles of left-libertarianism, it seems just to not allow people to hold over \$3 billion in total wealth. This would allow those like Winfrey and Bezos to benefit from their ingenuity and effort, while still making sure that going too far above an already vastly unequal \$1 billion wouldn't occur.

In conclusion, this paper has summarized three theories of distributive justice: traditional libertarianism, luck egalitarianism and left-libertarianism. It has then viewed the American billionaires Oprah Winfrey, Richard Sackler and Jeff Bezos through these three different lenses. Finally, it has provided my own opinions on the current state of wealth inequality in the United States, as well as the theory I believe best resolves this issue. With the emergence of COVID-19, wealth inequality has come into sharper focus. As the pandemic continues to exacerbate both the causes and effects of wealth inequality (Qureshi, 2020), an understanding of various frameworks for distributive justice will be crucial if an actionable consensus is to ever be reached. Thus, in the coming years, the national conversation about who is deserving of their wealth, and who is not, will become ever more present, and ever more necessary.

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