

**Freedom and Wealth: Challenging the Libertarian Debate**

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The libertarian point of view has grown pervasive in the political climate as discussions of wealth redistribution persist. Michael Sandel's *Justice: What's The Right Thing to Do?* defines the libertarian belief of justice as "respecting and upholding the voluntary choices made by consenting adults."<sup>1</sup> In maintaining this belief, libertarians have voiced their opposition to welfare systems and policies that encourage one to surrender a portion of their wealth for the common good. In such systems, the upper class would be primarily targeted, exemplified in U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren's proposed wealth tax for those who pass a threshold of \$50 million.<sup>2</sup> While this tax could potentially pay for universal childcare, higher wages, free tuition, improved medical aid, and other domestic benefits, libertarians maintain that any tax, even on those with excess wealth, is an infringement of personal property. Although largely considered a political and economic issue, philosophical perceptions of freedom emerge as the fulcrum on which American liberty is defined. In this paper, I will explain my opposition to the libertarian argument by drawing from Sandel's *Justice* and other influential figures in wealth discourse. In doing so, I will discuss our nation's perception of freedom—particularly the roots from which it builds—and how this shapes political thought. Ultimately, I argue that the solution does not lie in the abandonment of libertarian theory, but rather in the reform of the theory's foundations.

Sandel effectively describes the central conflict in theory disagreement by asserting the subjectivity of justice:

To ask whether a society is just is to ask how it distributes the things we prize—income and wealth, duties and rights, powers and opportunities, offices and honors. A just society

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Sandel, *Justice: What's The Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Warren Democrats, "Ultra-Millionaire Tax," Elizabeth Warren, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://elizabethwarren.com/plans/ultra-millionaire-tax>.

distributes these goods in the right way; it gives each person his or her due. The hard questions begin when we ask what people are due, and why.<sup>3</sup>

In an attempt to answer the hard questions, or provide a solution to what people are due and why, I raise that libertarianism is fundamentally valid in concept, but our definition of freedom must be changed. While I agree that upholding voluntary choices is a central part of any good society, the way we perceive liberty has been tarnished by commercial values. Through the glorification of capital and wealth, individuals have been conditioned to intertwine their perception of freedom with monetary property, which is non-human. Freedom, in essence, should directly relate to elements of one's humanity; a "free" life is one in which identity, choice, and opinion are not infringed upon. However, through time, wealth has become so deeply tied to personal identity that, even when in excess, its seizure is considered an infringement of one's intrinsic human right. As Marx and Engels put it in *The Communist Manifesto*, capitalism renders all sentimental and human elements "mere money relations."<sup>4</sup> Money becomes such a central factor in one's existence, that it is overlooked that it could not have been obtained without buyers, employees, and manufacturers, and thus, it cannot be considered the undeniable sole property of the owner. Rather than acknowledging wealth as a means of obtaining human necessities, such as food and shelter, wealth itself has become the end goal, despite its inherent uselessness if not used for purchase. With this goal, excess income becomes a seemingly inherent part of one's identity, as it is directly tied to social status.

The main issue that arises from this perception of freedom is it clouds our ability to identify true freedom infringements in society. Common issues that plague the lower class, such as food insecurity, addiction, and financial stress are all obstacles in pursuing the life one desires.

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<sup>3</sup> Sandel, *Justice*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964), 62.

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, if one cannot satisfy physiological needs, he is incapable of pursuing any need beyond it.<sup>5</sup> Thus, "wage slaves" experience a lack of freedom in their daily lives, which is fueled by the need to support themselves and possibly their families. By withholding aid, those with excess wealth exacerbate this lack, oblivious of their own freedom which is abundant compared to those shackled by the consequences of financial hardship. Having tied their wealth so profoundly to their identity, its loss is considered unjust. Ultimately, however, the wealthy individual is free to make life-decisions wage slaves cannot. By acknowledging that money is not inherently tied to our human value, and is merely a practical tool to receive property, we will be able to give it up without feeling as though the action is unjust. We will promote freedom in our nation by fulfilling basic human needs, allowing those who never had a choice in their pursuits to cultivate a life they desire.

Ultimately, the principles I maintain are not necessarily ones of virtue or libertarianism, but an amalgamation of the two. Essentially, I do not believe the two are mutually exclusive. To clarify my point, I will refer to Sandel's explanation of both liberty and virtue. In describing liberty through a modern philosophical lens, he writes: "the principles of justice that define our rights should not rest on any particular conception of virtue, or of the best way to live. Instead, a just society respects each person's freedom to choose his or her own conception of the good life."<sup>6</sup> Conversely, in his description of virtue, he writes: "Greed is a vice, a bad way of being, especially when it makes people oblivious to the suffering of others... In times of trouble, a good society pulls together...people look out for one another."<sup>7</sup> While both principles are presented as contradictory, I believe they are compatible if we reform the way we perceive liberty. By

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<sup>5</sup> Research History, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," Research History, June 16, 2012, <http://www.researchhistory.org/2012/06/16/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs/?print=1>.

<sup>6</sup> Sandel, *Justice*, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Sandel, *Justice*, 11.

considering one's well-being a hallmark of maintaining their freedom, we will gain the ability to respect their choices while simultaneously "looking out" for them. It is not necessarily an idea rooted in utilitarianism, as Sandel raises one of its important shortcomings: "it is not possible to measure and compare all values and goods on a single scale."<sup>8</sup> Well-being is abstract and varies across groups and individuals, making "maximum good" an elusive goal. Ultimately, I believe the solution lies in the prioritization of human welfare and opposition to wealth glorification. If we, as a society, collectively disintegrate wealth from our perception of human value, we may find ourselves capable of solving the issues that plague our nation while also maintaining a strong sense of freedom as human beings.

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<sup>8</sup> Sandel, *Justice*, 28.

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