

# Challenging Extreme Inequality: The Case for Wealth-Constraining Egalitarianism

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## Introduction

Within the literature on distributive justice there exists a fundamental disagreement in how to better distribute external resources between members of societies. Sufficiency advocates the need for a universal entitlement to a minimum baseline, so that everyone can lead minimally decent lives. Egalitarians, on the other hand, are more concerned in ensuring that *certain types* of inequality do not obtain and therefore seek to arrange society so that nobody is worse off than another simpliciter (standard egalitarianism) or that nobody is made worse off through no fault or choice of their own (luck egalitarianism).<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is to articulate the need for an understanding of egalitarianism that not only seeks to ensure that all persons stand in relations of equality to one other,<sup>2</sup> but that such relations are shaped by the realities of both human sufficiency and the scarcity of natural resources. We argue that while sufficiency ideas (such as basic income) take the former into account, little has been said in egalitarian theorizing about the latter.

In section I of this paper, we highlight the central tenets of sufficientarian thinking and advocate the need for a sufficiency threshold in any robust and non-ideal account of distributive justice. Given the humanitarian scope of the doctrine of sufficiency, we argue that there are no other distributive principles to which sufficiency should be sacrificed. Notwithstanding this, however, we argue that sufficiency is ultimately limited as an instrument of social justice. In particular, by confining its attention to acute deprivations and vulnerabilities below a ‘sufficiency threshold’, it fails to address social evils that arise in a post-sufficiency social environment. In section II, we argue that extreme

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Temkin, “Egalitarianism Defended,” *Ethics*, 113 (2003): 764-782, p. 767.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality?” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287-337.

inequalities of wealth and income are invariably almost always bad for society. In order to address patterns of social vulnerability created through deep disparities of material welfare, we deem that a modified theory of egalitarianism is needed.<sup>3</sup> We deem it essential, therefore, to put forward a view that draws upon both sufficiency and egalitarian ideas. This pluralist view states that although sufficiency is the most essential component of a decent society, *relative* vulnerabilities determined by the interrelationship between the most well off and the least well off must also be addressed. Such relational vulnerabilities are, in our view, detrimental to the ideals of equal democratic participation and the eradication of discrimination and oppression. On this view, even in the absence of poverty, a more egalitarian distribution of resources is still required if we are to support the necessary conditions for human flourishing.

Ordinarily, one solution to the problem of extreme inequality of wealth and income might be to raise the material standards of the least well off so that they better match those of the better off. But given the scarcity of natural resources and the adverse consequences arising from their use, we find this approach ecologically naïve and practically unworkable. Instead, our account of distributive justice aims not only to protect individuals from falling below a given sufficiency threshold, but seeks to restrict the levels of excess material wealth accumulated by those who are most well-off.

Hence, even though what ultimately matters from the point of view of justice is that all persons are capable of leading good lives, as opposed to being simply recipients of equal amounts of external resources, we argue that *both* poverty and extreme wealth are detrimental to the achievement of the former, and that each, for different reasons, are morally problematic.

## I Sufficiency

Within the literature on global justice and distributive ethics, proponents of sufficientarianism argue that no member of society should lack the material resources or

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<sup>3</sup> We note the special contribution made by Paula Casal in “Why Sufficiency is not Enough,” *Ethics*, 117 (2007): 296-326.

social goods needed to live above “some critical threshold of advantage”.<sup>4</sup> The threshold is leveled at such a point that those living below it are viewed as being not only more vulnerable to oppression and exploitation but also deemed to live lives that are too impoverished to count as truly human. The aim of sufficientarianism is thus to draw attention to the basic needs of those living below the threshold, and to redistribute available resources in such a way as to ensure that “as many people as possible have enough or, in other words, to maximize the incidence of sufficiency.”<sup>5</sup>

There are, however, two types of sufficiency thesis: one positive, the other negative.<sup>6</sup> The positive thesis, which we endorse, simply states that sufficiency matters. The negative thesis, on the other hand, states that sufficiency is not only *necessary* but also *sufficient* in ensuring that social (and global) justice obtains. Moreover, the negative theory rejects the importance of equality or priority above the sufficiency threshold in the distribution of resources,<sup>7</sup> and focuses solely on the most basic conditions required for flourishing. In other words, advocates of the negative thesis refrain from seeking to achieve equality between the most well off and the least well off because, at least in their view, once everyone has ‘enough’, differences in resource distribution become trivial.<sup>8</sup> Frankfurt, for instance, argues that “[i]f everyone had enough it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others”.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Martha Nussbaum, while defending her cosmopolitan list of basic capabilities argues that distributive justice no

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<sup>4</sup> Casal, “Why Sufficiency is not Enough,” p. 299.

<sup>5</sup> Harry Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” *Ethics* 98 (1987): 21-43, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> Casal, “Why Sufficiency is not Enough.”

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of sufficiency views see: Harry Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal”; Harry Frankfurt, “Equality and Respect”, *Social Research* 64 (1997): 3-15; Harry Frankfurt, “The Moral Irrelevance of Equality,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 14 (2000): 87-103; Roger Crisp, “Equality, Priority, and Compassion”, *Ethics* 113 (2003): 745-763; Roger Crisp, “Egalitarianism and Compassion,” *Ethics* 114 (2004): 119-126; and for the most recent affirmation, Robert Huseby, “Sufficiency: Restated and Defended,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 18 (2010): 178-197.

<sup>8</sup> At the level of praxis, the concept of a basic income represents one particular route to sufficiency. At its core, a basic income is a payment distributed by the state, to which all members of society are unconditionally entitled. According to Van Parijs, basic income is different from general social welfare, as the particulars of one’s individual circumstances – their living arrangements, place of residence, employment situation, level of education, personal tastes and so forth – hold no bearing whatsoever over their eligibility to receive the payment. Basic income is thus a payment “on which a person can safely count, on which a life can firmly rest, and to which any other income, whether in cash or in kind, from work or savings, from the market or the state, can legitimately be added”. See Philippe Van Parijs, “Basic Income Capitalism” *Ethics* 102 (1992): 465-484, p. 472.

<sup>9</sup> Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” p. 21.

longer applies after sufficiency is achieved at the global level.<sup>10</sup> In placing absolute priority upon individuals living in conditions below a given sufficiency threshold, sufficientarians make no serious attempt to address complaints arising among those living anywhere above the threshold.

Insofar as it represents a means of ensuring that no human being is left with basic needs unmet, we endorse the moral urgency of ensuring that sufficiency takes priority over other pursuits of distributive justice. In theory at least, as long as the sufficiency threshold is leveled at some realistic point at which all human beings could achieve their basic capabilities, there is no reason to believe that poverty would exist under such an arrangement as it does today. Absolute vulnerabilities – those caused by lack of access to food, shelter, security, clothes and so forth – would conceivably be eradicated. Hence, at the most foundational level, sufficiency constitutes a basic condition for all further human freedoms and endeavors.

The unconditional nature of sufficientarianism also ensures that considerations of desert play no role in the allocation of resources for meeting basic human needs. The need for unconditionality is essential if we are seriously committed to the idea that regardless of behavior, all persons are equally deserving of basic moral concern. (Indeed if considerations of desert mattered at such a basic level, individuals would arguably need to “earn” their moral worth). In addition, because it is applied impersonally, sufficientarian principles can be implemented with great efficiency. By guaranteeing individuals the minimum resources needed to live decent lives, a sufficientarian approach provides *a necessary* condition for the achievement of distributive justice.

However morally urgent we may conceive sufficiency to be, it remains the case that it lacks the theoretical features required to address the *relative* social vulnerabilities that follow from extreme material inequalities. At best, sufficiency helps us achieve the minimum conditions required to sustain human life, but fails to denounce and rectify patterns of exploitation, domination and control that inevitably arise from gross disparities of wealth within and across societies. Thus, sufficientarians view equality with

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<sup>10</sup> For a full list of the capabilities see: Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality and Species Membership*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) p. 76-77. For her discussion on sufficiency, *Frontiers of Justice*, p. 291-295.

skepticism. Frankfurt argues that egalitarianism “distracts people from measuring the requirements to which their individual natures and their personal circumstances give rise...and encourages them instead to insist upon a level of economic support that is determined by a calculation in which the particular features of their own lives are irrelevant.”<sup>11</sup> For him, as long as everyone is granted access to the resources needed to live above the minimum threshold, theories of distributive justice should have nothing more to say.<sup>12</sup> Precisely because the negative thesis denies any moral relevance of equality once sufficiency has been achieved, there is effectively no concern for distributive justice *above* the minimum threshold.

We believe that such skepticism towards equality is directly connected to an understandable anxiety around assessing a persons’ lot as a function of how others are doing. That is, if someone’s condition is bad, it should be bad regardless of how well-off or badly-off other members of society are. Although intuitively appealing, this individualistic approach to wellbeing seems misguided. For, as long as huge disparities of wealth exist anywhere along the socio-economic spectrum, there will also invariably exist the kinds of disparities in power, privilege and interdependency that create and sustain vulnerabilities in the first place.

## II

### **Inequality**

Up until now, we have endorsed the theoretical utility of sufficientarianism, but with the caveat that inequalities are not, as sufficientarians often claim, of no moral importance. Against the common catch-cry of sufficientarian thought – that is, “[i]f everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others”<sup>13</sup> – we argue here that it is wrong to ignore the normative implications of post-sufficiency inequality. It is not obvious to us that, once all forms of deprivation have been eliminated where they occur below a given humanitarian threshold, morally salient and harmful

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<sup>11</sup> Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality?” p. 291

<sup>13</sup> Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” *Ethics*, 98 (1987): 21-43, p. 21.

patterns of vulnerability and risk would not also follow from some having far more resources than others.

That extreme inequality of material wealth exists in the world today is hardly controversial. Readers will be familiar with facts like those highlighted in the United Nations' Human Development Report, stating that the world's richest 500 individuals have a combined income greater than that of the poorest 416 million.<sup>14</sup> If this figure serves to outline the general extent of material inequality, in what ways might the uneven distribution of external resources count against the moral quality of society? At the outset, we remind the reader that we are here purely concerned with extreme inequalities, as opposed to slight inequalities. Obviously, it isn't always clear at what exact point an unproblematic inequality becomes detrimental to society. While this is no doubt important, it concerns us less here than the task of showing that there are morally-significant reasons to object to inequality, at least in its most extreme forms.

*[A] Extreme inequalities of wealth and income promote "stigmatizing differences in status".<sup>15</sup>*

Within the relevant literature, those who object to disparities of material wealth note its negative effects on subjective evaluations of self worth. They argue that, even after everyone has been given enough of whatever they need to meet sufficiency requirements, the least well off are still likely to experience a degree of emotional or psychological separation from the most well off (and vice versa). The details of this are somewhat complex, but nevertheless deserve our attention. At the very least, class divisions affect how one views one's position in society. This is because relative differences in income inevitably give rise to a social system in which some have the resources to achieve certain functionings (or freedoms) and some don't. Similar to the effects of problematic gender and race relations, a society divided in classes is one in which some are oppressed and some are privileged due to certain beliefs that persons hold about the world. In the case we are concerned with, income is tied to individual and collective assessments about

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<sup>14</sup> UNDP Human Development Report 2005, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Scanlon, "The diversity of objections to inequality" in Thomas Scanlon, *The Difficulty of Tolerance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 214.

one's productive contribution to society and their social worth.

Of course, this isn't always a problem. Reasonable differences in annual salary often fairly reflect the actual variations in hours worked, or the input of individual talents, levels of effort, skills and responsibility, for which all deserve appropriate reward. But in the current world economy, individual efforts are neither accurately nor appropriately rewarded. Instead, the exaggerated rewards of the rich often emerge not from desert, thrift or prudence but from an economic system that makes it easier to accumulate when one owns more capital.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the tremendous social contribution of those less well off generates far less material reward than it arguably ought to.

This creates problems of negative self-evaluation. At the extreme bottom of the scale, this is likely to manifest into what Scanlon calls "stigmatizing differences in status", where those with less feel that their "life, abilities or accomplishments lack worth or are greatly inferior to those of others."<sup>17</sup> At the higher end of the social hierarchy, it is not difficult to imagine the obverse effect – where those receiving the most material reward for their work are seduced by feelings of inflated self-worth and superiority. On this view, the elimination of social marginalization and deprivation is not purely a matter of meeting basic needs in an objective sense, since social evils are subjective in nature. The experience of poverty, for example, is as conditional upon relative material differences as it is on absolute deprivations. "It is the riches of others", Alan Ryan argues, "that turn our sufficiencies into sources of shame and humiliation." One example he uses is of Australian aboriginals, whose sense of relative self-worth in society diminished through English colonization, even as their level of access to material wealth rose. In Ryan's view, "[t]o be poor in the demoralizing sense is to be poorer *than others*."<sup>18</sup>

[B] *Extreme inequalities of wealth distort patterns of economic advantage and control.*

In *The diversity of objections to inequality*, Thomas Scanlon reveals that extreme levels of material inequality often give the wealthy "an unacceptable degree of control over

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<sup>16</sup> For instance by lending money at high interest rates or by investing in productive and speculative economic activities.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Scanlon, "The diversity of objections to inequality," p. 212.

<sup>18</sup> Alan Ryan, "Does Inequality Matter – For its Own Sake?" *Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation*, (2002): 225-243, p. 233. Emphasis added.

others”.<sup>19</sup> In modern capitalist societies – where economic interaction is based on competition for limited resources – this is not difficult to see. On the one hand, those with the greatest share of wealth enjoy greater control over the processes of decision-making, the modes of production and the flow of resources through the market. They occupy the senior ranks of an economic chain of command that delivers far greater opportunities to those with higher capital. Their wants are almost always met because they have the greatest access to the tools required to attain them. In other words, they determine “what gets produced, what kinds of employment are offered, what the environment of a town or state is like, and what kind of life one can live there.”<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, those with fewer resources face a constrained set of economic and social choices. They make the decisions that they have to make from the small matrix of options available to them. Even after sufficiency has been achieved, the security or sustainability of their situation may be found lacking in important ways. They may own their own house, but have to pay exorbitant taxes on their mortgage. They may live in an affordable and safe enough town or suburb, but one that offers fewer public services to the high average income in the area. They may have regular and stable employment, but are incapable of purchasing the more expensive house in the centre, therefore being forced to commute a few hours each day. Free public schooling may be available to their children, but may lack the quality of teaching staff who prefer to work at private schools. Their lives may be deemed sufficient in all kinds of ways, but still be found potentially lacking because of the interaction between them and the better off.

In many ways, the primary failing of sufficientarianism has been to articulate these two factors – the economic disadvantage of the least well-off and the economic advantage of the most well-off – as *morally* separable phenomena. As mentioned above, for Sufficientarians, once everyone’s basic needs are met, it makes little difference whether some enjoy far greater access to wealth and income than others; inequality only really matters whenever it exists between those that live below the sufficiency threshold,

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<sup>19</sup> Scanlon 2003, “The diversity of objections to inequality,” p. 205.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

and those that live above it.<sup>21</sup> So, (to invoke some familiar examples), it makes no difference whether an extremely wealthy citizen owns six expensive cars, providing that the materially less well off have access to public transport. Similarly, it is of no moral concern that the super rich may possess the resources to purchase the finest champagne ever produced, whereas the purely rich may only be able to afford a slightly reduced quality label.<sup>22</sup> On this view, sufficientarians reject as “reprehensible” comparative principles that propose to evaluate individual resource entitlements with reference to what others have, on the basis that this diverts attention away from people’s *real* needs.<sup>23</sup> This attitude fails to fully appreciate the relational dynamics that greatly underpin economic (and therefore also *social*) fortunes.

To be fair, Frankfurt makes a small attempt to address this. He states that “the circumstances of others may reveal interesting possibilities and provide data for useful judgments concerning what is normal or typical.” And so “[t]he amount of money [one] needs may depend in a more direct way on the amounts others have...[insofar as] money may bring power or prestige or other competitive advantages”.<sup>24</sup> But at risk of taking comparisons of affluence “too seriously”, this is as far as Frankfurt goes. We view this as a mistake, as most contemporary market economies are structured in such a way as to provide greater benefit to those with more wealth. The potential for fulfillment of an individual’s needs and the realization of her conception of the good is not, as Frankfurt claims, detached from the actions of other social and economic agents, but rather constituted *by them*. As Ryan notes, “[t]o have a higher income than others is to be able to exert more market power than they can. Money is command over the labor of others, and therefore the possession of more of it is the possession of more power over the labor of others.”<sup>25</sup> In this sense, the amount of money or wealth or income that another has is of direct importance to of the achievement of social (and global) justice.

This is obvious in at least two ways. First, through their higher buying power, the

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<sup>21</sup> Rawls holds a similar view, arguing that contracting parties behind the ‘veil of ignorance’ will show mutual disinterest toward the successes and failures of their compatriots. See Ryan, “Does Inequality Matter – For its Own Sake?” p. 229.

<sup>22</sup> See Ryan “Does Inequality Matter-For its Own Sake?” and Crisp, “Equality, Priority, and Compassion,” *Ethics* 113 (2003): 745-763, for an expansion of these cases.

<sup>23</sup> Frankfurt “Equality as a Moral Ideal”, p. 34.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> Alan Ryan “Does Inequality Matter-For its Own Sake?” p. 237.

rich raise the cost of living for the least well-off. This occurs directly, when market prices for particular goods or services are set higher to reflect the potential of wealthier citizens to pay more. This is evident in housing markets in many parts of the world, where price increases at the top end of the market put upward pressure on the cost of properties at the lower end, forcing those with less to pay more than they otherwise would have to.<sup>26</sup> Further, the price and quality of particular goods and services is also indirectly affected by the economic choices made by the wealthy. Consider the case of transport: because a handful of well-off citizens drive expensive cars, the cost of car insurance premiums is made higher on average for everyone to reflect the augmented cost of damages. Similarly, because those with higher incomes purchase private automobiles, the state is forced to direct funding away from generally more efficient public transport initiatives and use it to maintain grossly inefficient and polluting road networks.<sup>27</sup>

Second, further disadvantage is likely in markets where the desired goods or services are in *limited supply*. Whenever there exists only a given number of a particular thing, each thing that is purchased by one person represents one less thing available to others. The housing market again serves as an example of this. For as house prices rise in central suburbs due to high demand among the better off, those with comparatively fewer resources are forced to purchase further away, where demand for limited houses is lower. In this sense, resource inequality directly translates into uneven access to particular choices that, while not necessarily functions of sufficiency, may contribute negatively to one's conception of the good.

Of course, the problem of uneven access to certain goods or services isn't always a matter of moral concern. All else being equal, we may not necessarily object to some having greater choice to purchase trivial goods (such as limited edition film merchandise, or concert tickets). In these cases, it would be implausible to maintain that everybody should have the same options (unless of course they all accessed similar opportunities, worked equally hard and desired the same things). But in the space of the free market, one's ability to compete for access to certain goods and services is often directly tied to the comparative abilities (expressed through resources) of others. One man's competitive

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p 238.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p, 238.

advantage is often another's comparative *disadvantage*.

[C] *Extreme inequalities of wealth place the less well-off at greater risk of harm and insecurity.*

To expand upon the point made above, extreme inequalities of material resources place the least well off at undue risk of harm. Consider a case of an island community affected by rising sea levels. As it becomes obvious that low-lying portions of the island will gradually become flooded and unlivable, different members of the community consider their options. Seeing that everyone will eventually have to move away from the coast to escape the flooding, and knowing that they have more than enough money to pay the highest price, the wealthiest citizens purchase land in the mountains where they will live in guaranteed safety from the floods. At the same time, those with fewer resources have no way of competing with the wealthiest, so they settle for the more affordable, but only slightly elevated, land at the foot of the mountains. This gives them a good chance of avoiding the flooding. Finally, those with the least resources – although they may otherwise be sufficiently well off – are forced to take whatever land is leftover, even if the prices do not accurately reflect the benefits accrued by moving a few meters up. In this case, all members of the community have the same interest (that is, avoiding harm by relocating to safer land) but only the most well off can realize this, which they do at the expense of the less well off. Of course, the gain to the well off is not so much the direct material reward of living in a house at the top of the mountain, but the security that derives as a result, which is instrumental in the pursuit of other aims.

But why should the apparent 'good fortune' of those wealthy enough to secure their safety from rising flood waters present itself as a matter of moral concern? In the case presented above, wealth and income generate direct access to personal and material security. Those with greater material holdings are not only in a better position to transform their earnings into a larger share of a good (security) that would be equally valuable to everyone, but to take advantage of and exploit others. Consider again the case of the island community. Let us now imagine that, having secured great portions of land that will remain unaffected by rising water levels, the wealthy see the potential profit that

can be made if they partition parts of their land and rent it to those less well off. They can divide their land as they see fit, into as many small allotments as will reap them the greatest returns, and can charge whatever price they like. Should they wish to leave their land vacant, or use it for alternative purposes, they may do so. At the same time, however, similar options will not be available to those less well-off. While the wealthy will likely take advantage of their favorable situation, the less well off will be forced to work second jobs - perhaps jobs that present a further degree of risk – to meet the exorbitant rent for a small apartment higher up the mountain. This is likely to leave them with less time to devote to other important areas of their lives (such as their children or family, their education, health or leisure) and less physical space to live. Should they feel unhappy with the arrangement, it is unlikely that they will protest it, because such an arrangement, in the context of the rising water levels, is surely better than no arrangement at all. This type of uneven influence and control over the lives of the relatively less well-off is reminiscent of Thucydides' famous dictum, that "whereas they that have odds of power exact as much as they can...the weak yield to such conditions as they can get." It is not hard to see that the potential for harmful exploitation provides a further moral case against extreme material inequality.

[D] *Extreme inequalities of wealth undermine the fairness of political systems.*

At the same time as great disparities in material wealth produce objectionable relations of economic advantage, control and vulnerability between rich and poor, high levels of inequality corrode democratic processes. While in theory all members of democratic societies enjoy formal equality before the law, material advantages correlate to unjust political influence and privilege.<sup>28</sup> Most obviously, those with greater wealth are in a better position to lobby politicians and influence political decision-making. In modern democratic societies an individual's material resources also strongly correspond to their chance of political candidacy. Without the funds to finance an extensive political campaign, it is unlikely that those with relatively little money and discretionary time will succeed in sustaining public interest in their own political aspirations.

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<sup>28</sup> Alan Ryan "Does Inequality Matter-For its Own Sake?" p. 236.

Even when direct lobbying is severely constrained by law, the interests of the wealthy may still overshadow the fairness of political decisions and processes, when wealthy persons have greater access to both time and resources to attend political events, to manipulate the political scene, and to influence political discourse, through the media. As Brian Barry has pointed out, large firms that command the private decision-making structures and material resources that transform the subjective welfare of voters possess a power advantage that can be exploited to get the government to act in ways that it wouldn't otherwise.<sup>29</sup> Not only is this unjust, but it also supplants the possibility of future egalitarian projects. As Pogge suggests, the allocation of political power is disproportionately skewed toward those who have the most to lose through redistribution. High inequality, he argues, "tends to bias the range of publicly available information" about certain distributive problems, "the range of publicly available explanations of [their] persistence", and the "range of reform proposals [available] to address [them]".<sup>30</sup> For him, inequality matters "because it may well be irreversible by cutting us off, politically, from future low-inequality equilibria".<sup>31</sup>

Importantly, other branches of state authority, such as the justice system, are also affected by inequalities of wealth. As Alan Ryan notes, "in the United States, the death penalty is never carried out on anyone who has the money to hire a halfway competent lawyer, and...in all societies the poor receive worse justice than do the rich."<sup>32</sup> If democratic egalitarianism is what we are genuinely concerned with, due to the strong moral case for all persons participating as equals in society, then the fact that some have a much greater ability to influence the political process becomes morally unacceptable.

In each of the above cases, the interrelationship between relative weakness and strength (described through differences in material wealth) is problematic in society, because it distorts people's incentives to cooperate as equals in their social arrangements. Dealing with weakness alone (through sufficiency) does not create a distortion-proof system because the strong can still distort things for their advantage. In this sense it is not clear that sufficiency provides for the expected level of individual autonomy and freedom

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<sup>29</sup> Brian Barry "Capitalists rule OK?" *Politics Philosophy Economics* 1 (2002): 155-184, p. 171.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Pogge "Why Inequality Matters" in David Held & Ayse Kaya (eds.) *Global Inequality* (Cambridge, Polity Press: 2007), p. 142.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>32</sup> Ryan, "Does Inequality Matter-For its Own Sake?" p. 236.

under conditions of extreme inequality.

#### IV Equality

Having presented a number of objections to the social evils caused by extreme inequalities of wealth and income, we now argue that any reasonable theory of distributive justice must take seriously the need for greater equity of access to, and enjoyment of, material resources. Only by eliminating relative disparities of material wealth will it be possible to address related patterns of domination and exploitation which in themselves present important barriers to the achievement of justice in other important spheres of social life. For this reason, we regard sufficiency as only an important component of a reasonable theory of distributive justice. To be sure, it serves to direct the attention of justice when the most basic human needs have not been met, but it inevitably relinquish all moral concern about the social evils that arise from unevenly distributed wealth. Hence, good theories of distributive justice require egalitarian principles, to operate in conjunction with principles of sufficiency. We argue that democratic egalitarianism, constrained by sufficiency and the scarcity of natural resources provides the fairest distributive arrangement to ensure that persons stand in a position of equality with one another.

But before moving on to talk of resource constraints, we seek to clarify a number of characteristics underlying our approach. First, it is not our aim to suggest that equality is always a requirement of morality or justice. That is, we accept that there are areas of human life in which inequalities will always invariably exist, and which present no problems for distributive justice. Egalitarians are often criticized on the false presumption that they view all inequalities as morally problematic. But most egalitarians accept the reality that no two people will ever be entirely equal.<sup>33</sup> Their natural endowments, personal tastes, physical strengths, living circumstances, employment, parenting, social networks and so forth will all vary, creating important differences in the way they view

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<sup>33</sup> Temkin, "Egalitarianism Defended," p. 767.

their worlds and go about pursuing the good life. Along with others, we openly accept this. Importantly, however, we view inequalities as being problematic only in those realms in which they carry with them a greater likelihood of causing or sustaining undue exploitation or domination of some (usually the least well-off) by others (usually the most well-off).

Related to this, we also do not argue for equality as an intrinsically valuable good. In other words, we do not advocate equality for its own sake. Instead, we argue for equality as an effective instrument to constrain the harmful *inequalities* that obtain between the extraordinarily wealthy and the comparatively poor. To be sure, we acknowledge that some degree of inequality is often a good thing for society. It allows a level of differentiation between individual rewards based on important differences in human input. There is reason to believe that this is a positive element of society, as it allows people to take pride in their work, to strive for greater achievements, and to take responsibility for their failures. Having said this, we hold the view that it is bad for some to be worse off than others where the disparity between the most well off and the least well off increases the risk of undue harm to the least well off; harm that can be understood as physical, economic, political, or social coercion or marginalization. In this sense, our aim is not exact equality, but rather a degree of equalization that seeks to reduce the gap (and its associated harms) between both ends of the current socio-economic spectrum.

Further, while our view of distributive justice deliberately relies upon the distribution of material resources (that is, wealth and income) as its currency, we hold that resource distribution is neither the most important nor the ultimate aim of our egalitarian concern. Ultimately, what matters most is not how much money or credits one earns, or the total value of their accumulated assets, but the types of lives enjoyed by each individual, measured through other values such as democratic participation, human functioning or wellbeing.<sup>34</sup> Despite this, we nevertheless restrict our view of distributive justice to the allocation of material resources across society. Why? More than any other factor, the distribution of material resources overwhelmingly determines the character of social, political and economic relations. This is not to deny the importance of the social

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<sup>34</sup> Most notably, see Elizabeth Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?".

relationships within which goods are distributed, as some have rightly noted,<sup>35</sup> but to give preference to a focus that conceptualizes distributions of material wealth as the primary basis from which all social relations are invariably constituted.

With these less controversial details now spoken for, we move to argue that, insofar as questions of distributive justice are concerned, the existence of extreme material wealth presents as much of a problem for egalitarian aims as does the persistence of acute deprivation. We make this claim because, in a world in which the natural resources required to sustain human life are severely limited, the general egalitarian aim of reducing inequality by raising the wellbeing of the least well-off to more closely match that of the better-off is entirely unworkable. It is now common knowledge in discourses of sustainability and environmental ethics that the planet is under enormous strain to maintain the world's current population at existing living standards. Natural resources are being depleted at increasing rates, ecosystems and natural habitats are being systematically destroyed, and so-called 'bio-sinks' are faltering through overuse and mismanagement. To a significant extent, the global natural resource base from which all humans benefit is being irreparably exploited and damaged in the mad rush to generate and accumulate wealth. As a result, our overall ecological footprint – that is, the total quantity of environmental resources required to sustain human life – is growing beyond the planet's biological carrying-capacity. It will take more than one planet like our own to maintain current levels of consumption and accumulation into the future.

In response to this, the first point to be made here is that the overall human stresses placed on the planet's resources must be reduced, not expanded. Principles of distributive justice that look only at the deprivations of the least well-off without challenging the material exploits of the most well-off will inevitably fail to secure justice in any broad sense (that is, in a sense that incorporates a sustainable and environmental conception of justice). Rather, solving problems of deprivation, marginalization, domination and exploitation in this limited natural environment require more than simply raising the welfare levels of the least well-off. At a minimum, it requires situating the distributive aims of egalitarian justice within the material constraints of what is naturally possible given the realities of both current economic *and ecological* systems. This calls

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

for what Dobson describes as an account of ethics that takes into consideration our condition as biological beings.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, distributive schema that aim for some level of freedom and equality must seek to reengage human activity and the human self in an ontology that elevates the status of the natural world from ‘exploitable resource’ to that of a living world from which all human endeavors – including moral endeavors – are possible. For, as long as theories of justice reward accumulation and material gain at levels that exacerbate human pressures on the planet’s natural resources, there is little real likelihood that the issues alluded to in the previous section will be contained.

A further, and indeed more controversial step, then, is to begin to think seriously about not only raising the level of welfare of the least well-off (through sufficiency schemes and so on), but about placing greater restrictions on the economic freedoms of the most well-off. Just as institutions prohibit, constrain and regulate individual freedoms in various spheres (political, economic, social etc) in order to guarantee protection from further social evils, we see no reason to abstain from setting limitations on the degree and scope to which individuals may accumulate wealth and income. At the very least, this would dramatically alleviate pressures on the planet’s natural resources, while also reducing the gap between the most and least well-off, and the types of associated harms outlined above.

Moreover, setting limits to wealth and income is not only compatible with, but helps expand key liberal concepts, such as freedom. As Elizabeth Anderson has argued relations of equality are fundamental conditions of free lives.<sup>37</sup> This is true, she argues, because those living in relations of equality with others are far better placed to avoid forms of oppression that arise through relations of protracted inequalities. In Anderson’s view, equals are not subject to arbitrary violence or physical coercion by others; they enjoy shared access to processes of political decision-making, and govern their lives by their own wills; equals enjoy greater choice in the workplace, and are free to secure the appropriate rewards for their labor.<sup>38</sup> In short, equals are not marginalized, dominated or exploited by others, but are granted greater access to the virtuous features of liberal

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew Dobson, “Freedom and Dependency in an Environmental Age” *Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation* (2009): 151-172, p. 157.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality?” p. 315.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

democracy. At the same time, constraining patterns of human consumption to better reflect the planet's natural resource limits also promises to deliver its own sense of 'freedom'. But this is a freedom that diverges dramatically from the traditional liberal framing of the concept as 'domination over nature', and instead finds purchase in ideas of sustainability and human interdependence with nature.<sup>39</sup> In a sense, this is freedom as 'naturalized humanity'.

But what might wealth-limiting arrangements actually look like? There exist a number of ways to limit wealth, and we do not presume to account for all of them. Instead, we present two methods here. First, just as sufficiency theories draw upon the idea of a minimum welfare threshold that determines the level of material resources all should be guaranteed access to, wealth-limiting arrangements could foreseeably take advantage of a corresponding maximum threshold, above which the accumulated wealth or standard income of the most well-off would not be allowed to pass. Limits could be indexed according to both natural resource abundance and relative material differences between the least well-off and most well-off. Restrictions to wealth would not have to take blanket form, but could be tailored for different sectors. For example, restrictions in the housing market could be cashed out in terms of maximum limits to the number of homes/dwellings that could be purchased by any one individual or household, thereby freeing up market access to a greater share of the general population. Salary caps could be implemented across industries to ensure consistency, together with greater regulation of banking and investment practices.

Alternatively, wealth-limiting arrangements could take the form of a continuation of progressive taxation, (both for individuals and companies). Currently, most governments tax their citizens progressively, meaning that the proportion of an individual's income that is extracted through taxation will rise as their salary passes set tax thresholds (or tax brackets). Each threshold reflects an income range as well as a corresponding tax rate. In most economies, however, there is a cutoff point at which the tax rate no longer rises, irrespective of the level of salary earned above the highest rate. This could be changed, so that the extremely wealthy would continue to pay

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<sup>39</sup> For an excellent discussion of the conceptualization of 'nature' in liberal thought, see Dobson.

progressively higher tax rates, until potentially reaching the highest bracket, which would redirect nearly 100 per cent of earnings taken above the corresponding income threshold.

While it is our view that both higher tax rates at higher income levels and maximum income or wealth thresholds could produce the type of downward pressure or limits needed to restrict the accumulation of vast shares of wealth that overburden natural resources and exacerbate material inequalities, we do not intend to present a final verdict over any single policy. Our aim is instead to state the need to reconceptualize distributive justice within a framework that challenges inequality not only through actions that seek to eliminate material deprivation and poverty, but that also impose limitations on the accumulation of extreme wealth and access to capital.

### III

#### *Objections to Wealth-Limiting Egalitarianism*

We anticipate a number of objections to our argument and use the space that remains to seek to deal with these.

*[A] Wealth-limiting egalitarianism is nothing more than an envy-based theory of distribution*

The first objection to our proposed wealth-limiting egalitarianism is likely to come from those who view such targeted redistribution as part of a “politics of envy”.<sup>40</sup> For some critics, such as Crisp, egalitarian arguments predicated upon envy employ the notion that “it is bad if, through no fault of his or her own, one individual does worse than another” – where envy can be characterized by a type of “anger at anyone’s doing better than anyone else”.<sup>41</sup> Insofar as wealth-limiting egalitarianism aims to curb the riches of the extremely well-off for the betterment of everybody, it is not difficult to see why some might object to our view in this way. To the uninitiated, it may appear that wealth-limiting

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<sup>40</sup> Temkin, “Egalitarianism Defended,” p. 768.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Crisp, “Equality, Priority, and Compassion” *Ethics* (2003): 745-763, p. 749.

egalitarianism aims to relinquish the riches of the wealthy simply because the latter possess something that others do not.

But in response to this, we assert that envy plays absolutely no part in our argument for limits to wealth. Relative fairness, as we see it, represents an instrumental goal for the greater benefit of society, not a goal in itself. At least in cases when sufficiency has already been achieved, what matters for our theory of egalitarian justice is not how many resources different people have, but how much the relative difference in resources translates into power inequalities and opportunities for exploitation, control and domination. Hence, what motivates our argument has nothing to do with envy, or any other concern for what others have *per se*, but an acknowledgment that poverty and wealth, advantage and disadvantage are *relational* phenomena. As alluded to above, modern economies are fiercely competitive spheres in which individuals compete for scarce resources. Within the space of the economy, fortunes of a small few are predicated upon and driven by the relative ‘misfortunes’ of a great many others; one’s competitive material advantage corresponds (both directly and indirectly) to another’s *comparative disadvantage*. This point is highlighted in an example from Robert Goodin, in which he suggests that while “[i]t may well be none of my business how many widgets others have, or how well off they are in consequence...it certainly is my business how much money others have with which to bid against me for widgets.”<sup>42</sup> With this relational dynamic that links both rich and poor in mind, it is entirely acceptable – indeed *necessary* – to question and challenge the persistence of extreme material inequalities.

*[B] Wealth-limiting egalitarianism requires levelling down the resources of the most well-off.*

A second and more substantial objection to wealth-limiting egalitarianism can be presented in the form of the Leveling Down Objection. Proponents of the Leveling Down Objection claim that “there is no respect in which a situation is normatively improved merely by leveling down a better-off person to the level of someone who is worse off”.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Goodin, “Egalitarianism, Fetishistic and Otherwise,” *Ethics* 98 (1987): 44-49, pp. 46-47.

<sup>43</sup> Temkin, “Egalitarianism Defended,” p. 767.

They argue that egalitarian principles demand the leveling down of the welfares of some so as to ensure equality, irrespective of whether a more unequal situation would deliver greater overall welfare.<sup>44</sup> One oft-invoked example is that of the lifeboat case where, for argument's sake, three people are stuck in a lifeboat that will sink unless one person is thrown overboard. If no one is thrown overboard, all three will drown. Those who make the leveling down claim against egalitarianism argue that, out of her devotion to the principle of equality, the egalitarian requires letting all three drown *equally*, an outcome which is clearly perverse.<sup>45</sup> The objection is that pressing for equality in such cases is fetishistic, it serves no instrumental good and it says nothing about justice. Instead, non-egalitarians argue that an unequal arrangement (whereby one drowns and two survive in the lifeboat case) is far more favorable than the egalitarian position.

In response to the leveling down objection, a large cohort of egalitarian scholars have adopted a less stringent egalitarianism and accepted conditional inequalities between rich and poor, providing that such disparities do not harm the worst off (prioritarianism). This response to the leveling down objection has been articulated by a number of egalitarian scholars, including John Rawls and Brian Barry, and is often presented in the form of the Pareto argument for inequality.<sup>46</sup> The Pareto argument claims that inequality is acceptable – and indeed just – if it leads to a situation in which both the worst off and the best off are made better off than they would otherwise be under any alternative arrangement, while no-one is made worse-off.

To expand on this idea, if B denotes a situation in which there is less equality, but where everyone enjoys a higher standard of living than in an alternative situation (A), B is then said to be more just – and therefore Pareto-superior – when compared to A. While it may be the case that the situation of the best off is improved far more than that of the worst off under a Pareto-superior arrangement, the Pareto argument's claim that *everyone* would become better off (to some extent) justifies any inequalities that such an arrangement might produce. For Rawls, providing that nobody is made worse off, it makes little sense to value equality in its own right. Against Telic (intrinsic) egalitarians,

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Christiano & Will Braynen, "Inequality, Injustice and Levelling Down" *Ratio* (2008): 392-420, p. 393.

<sup>45</sup> Christiano & Braynen, "Inequality, Injustice and Levelling Down," p. 393.

<sup>46</sup> For an introduction to the Pareto argument, see G.A. Cohen, "The Pareto Argument for Inequality" *Social Philosophy and Policy Foundation* (1995), pp. 160-184.

Rawls states that an “equal division of all primary goods is *irrational* in view of the possibility of bettering everyone’s circumstances by accepting certain inequalities”.<sup>47</sup>

How might we respond to this? If everyone living in a non-egalitarian society would arguably be better off than in an egalitarian one, how is it that we might still argue for greater equality at the apparent expense of welfare? While, in theory, a Pareto-superior situation may be preferable to a Pareto-inferior but egalitarian one, we deny that a limited perspective applies in the real world. Unlike Rawls’ abstract model, the real world is comprised of multiple potential arrangements – not just A or B – offering different compromises between levels of welfare and inequality. This allows us, as potential observers, to select – or at least give philosophical preference to – social arrangements that express mutual concern for individual wellbeing *and* the material relations in which people stand relative to one another. For example, Cohen argues that, if to Rawls’ choice between an egalitarian society at one particular level of welfare and a second inegalitarian society at a higher level of overall welfare we were to add a third model society in which the level of overall welfare would be greater than in the first (but not quite as high as in the second), and the level of overall equality between best and worst off would be greater than in the second, there may be good reasons to favor the latter.<sup>48</sup> This, of course, presupposes that neither equality nor wellbeing take absolute priority as principles of distributive justice, but are both maximized until the point at which each begins to negatively affect the other. This is precisely what wealth-limiting egalitarianism aims to do.

Additionally, it is not always apparent that an improvement in living conditions (and so a movement to Pareto-superiority) brings about justice in any relevant sense. Consider, for example, a society in which the worst off find themselves at the sufficiency threshold. According to the Pareto-argument, moving them into an alternative arrangement, in which they have access to more goods and opportunities but at the cost of other important features (such as discretionary time for example) we would be tempted to see this as a more favorable arrangement. Of course, living a busy life may be preferable to lacking genuine alternatives for improving one’s lot, but this tells us little about the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.546. Emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup> See G.A. Cohen “The Pareto Argument for Inequality”, pp. 172-175.

moral qualities of a particular situation, especially if the better-off can access many opportunities without sacrificing their discretionary time.

Both the Levelling Down Objection and Pareto argument for inequality fail to grasp the relational affects of extreme inequality. To illustrate this, consider Larry Temkin's fictional case of a society where some citizens have discovered rare berries that make them immortal.<sup>49</sup> In light of this amazing discovery, as regular citizens die of old age, those lucky enough to have access to the berries live on forever. In Temkin's case, those who eat the berries and live eternal lives are made better off, while those who don't eat the berries continue to die as they otherwise would have, and are thus not made worse off. According to the Pareto argument, there is nothing wrong with this situation, because nobody is made worse off. According to the Levelling Down Objection, it would be senseless to expect that those with the berries should stop eating the berries simply for the sake of equalizing their life expectancy and relative welfare with their mortal counterparts. Against an egalitarian ethos, anti-egalitarians can claim that no good would be served by equalizing society's life expectancies, and thus that there is nothing bad about the inequality caused.

But suppose that the discovery of immortality berries by some begins to reshape the way that society functions. Knowing that they will enjoy immortality, the interests and values of those eating the berries change dramatically, and diverge from those of mortal citizens. Instead of working hard to sustain their retirement pensions, berry-eaters decide to work less, and holiday more. Knowing that they will live forever, they channel life insurance payments to luxury goods, and dramatically commit crimes given that 10 years in jail for white collar crimes are definitely worth it if they can then spend a subsequent 100 years in a life of luxury. In this scenario, it appears that although the discovery of immortality berries has made no one directly worse off, its effects on society have created patterns of vulnerability. A solution to the vulnerabilities arising from the discovery of the berries may be indeed to prevent the immortals for continuing their consumption.

*[C] Wealth-limiting egalitarianism undermines individual entitlement and ownership*

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<sup>49</sup> For a full description of this example, see Temkin, "Egalitarianism Defended," p. 781.

A further objection is likely to come from those who believe in the moral primacy of the market as a mechanism of distributive justice. The objection manifests itself in two slightly different but interrelated Libertarian arguments. The first states that the rewards delivered to each through the economy are a fair representation of the value of their individual input. Libertarians, in particular, argue that the market delivers to people what they deserve.<sup>50</sup> On this view, the low-paid cleaner or garbage collector deserves no more and no less than he or she receives, while the CEO of the vibrant multinational corporation also deserves no more and no less than that which she receives. The view here is that both input and reward are directly tapered to the efforts of the individual.

But no man is an island, especially when it comes to the successes one derives in the economy. Consider Sangiovanni's articulate response to an imaginary wealthy citizen:

It is certainly true that what you contribute overall to the joint social product depends, in part, on your particular talents and abilities, and the use you make of them. But consider the way in which your ability to make use of your talents depends on the contributions of others. First, the very market in which your talents are valued depends not only on others' preferences and tastes but also on the system of law governing your territory, and to others being restrained by that law. Domestic markets—and, indirectly, global markets as well—require the background provided by the shared legal corpus of the state, which governs areas ranging from torts to administration to property rights, contracts, corporations, and criminal law...

Second, consider that it is not only the market that depends on the contributions of others but also the opportunities you have had to develop your talents. It is your fellow citizens and residents who have provided the institutional framework in which you have flourished; it is they who have sustained and reproduced the basic goods, including the legal system, necessary for your successful participation in your society<sup>51</sup>.

Given the highly relational qualities of contemporary economic societies outlined by Sangiovanni, it is not obvious that distributive justice obtains when rewards for different inputs diverge beyond all reasonable measure.

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<sup>50</sup> Liam Murphy & Thomas Nagel, *The Myth of Ownership: Taxes and Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 32.

<sup>51</sup> Andrea Sangiovanni "Global Justice, Reciprocity, and the State" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (2007): 3-39, p. 25.

The second, and closely related criticism put forward by Libertarians argues that everyone deserves to keep what they earn or acquire on the basis that there exists “an inviolable right” to the accumulation of property.<sup>52</sup> For libertarians, “[o]ur original sovereignty over ourselves – a moral given, not created by the state – leaves us free to employ our capacities” and to decide “how to dispose of the product of any enterprise, individual or cooperative, that we have voluntarily undertaken”.<sup>53</sup> Arguments that challenge this ‘sovereign right’ to own property – such as the types of limitations on wealth and income that we propose – are therefore unjust in that they contradict the supposedly fundamental moral entitlements of the market economy.

In replying to this, we remind the reader that individual rights to property are not natural rights, but socially-constructed entitlements that ultimately originate from, and aspire to strongly social functions. That is, any moral rights to the production and accumulation of private wealth and property are granted collectively through society, on the assumption that they contribute to the general good. It is therefore illogical to suggest that private property rights are inviolable where they fail to promote the collective good, and even the fiercest Libertarians would find it difficult to refute this in praxis.<sup>54</sup> In the sphere of everyday life, for example, the state sets limits to the types of goods that can be bought or sold within the market, as a means of protecting citizens from harm and promoting their wellbeing. Child labor, voting rights, crown land, heritage listed property and other goods are all obscured from the market for this reason. Similarly, taxes are levied from individual incomes as collective down payments for an integrated system of political, legal, economic and social order that contributes to the flourishing of everyone.

In light of this, wealth-limiting egalitarianism fits neatly within the existing architectures that regulate property rights and entitlements. Because there is no such thing as an inviolable and presocial moral right to property and wealth, moreover, constraints on these cannot be rejected through appeals to principle alone. Instead, they must be challenged on pragmatic grounds, which we have shown to be more specious than commonly thought.

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<sup>52</sup> Murphy & Nagel *The Myth of Ownership*, p. 31.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

*[D] Wealth-limiting egalitarianism may impact negatively on the economy*

Some may object to wealth-limiting egalitarianism on the grounds that such an arrangement would negatively affect other features of the economy, such as productivity, employment, efficiency, innovation, government revenue, growth and investment. This is a genuine concern and one that we sympathize with. After all, the persuasive force of our argument relies less upon principles of justice than on the notion that its overall effects will prove beneficial to society in some morally relevant sense. Inasmuch as societies are made up of independently acting economic agents, whose fortunes and misfortunes, levels of wellbeing and deprivation are determined largely through market outcomes, it is an appropriate requirement that we defend wealth-limiting egalitarianism against the charge that it would prove negative for the economy.

We reply to this challenge in two steps. First, we encourage readers to consider seriously the ways in which the types of unequal economies that persist today actively harm and hinder the aspects listed above. That is to say, there are numerous ways in which economies of gross and rampant inequality stifle qualities like growth, employment and efficiency. While this does nothing to show that wealth-limiting arrangements wouldn't also produce undesirable effects, it does help situate our argument against an economic model that is far from perfect itself.

Second, it is not at all obvious to us that wealth-limiting arrangements would produce overall negative results for the economy. On the contrary, there is reason to believe that redistributive policies that reduce social and economic inequality by constraining the material returns of the most well-off would help *improve* the delivery of public goods and raise levels of overall efficiency.<sup>55</sup> By redistributing opportunities for wealth production and accumulation away from the top end of the economy, access to wealth and material resources might be expanded at the lower end, providing further opportunities for the less well-off, and contributing to employment and efficiency gains where they are often left wanting. The examples set by the Scandinavian economies – each with some of the highest levels of income and wealth equality in the world – suggest

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<sup>55</sup> Murphy & Nagel, *The Myth of Ownership*, p. 86-87

the very real benefits to be obtained through the elimination of radical material and social inequalities.

Whatever the expected gains and losses of policies that place limits on material wealth, we deliberately do not go as far as to specify an exact form, leaving open decisions of practical implementation to the model that achieves the happiest marriage between equality and wellbeing.

*[E] Wealth-limiting egalitarianism relies upon the establishment of arbitrary thresholds*

Finally, one further objection to our proposal is that, insofar as it meets sufficiency theories half way, it inherits problems associated with the establishment of arbitrary thresholds. Our response to this objection is short. That it might be difficult to ascertain the precise level below which an individual falls vulnerable to unacceptable suffering or deprivation (in the sufficiency case) and above which one is unfairly gaining an advantage over her fellow citizens (in the case of wealth-limiting egalitarianism) is a valid concern, but one that we ultimately ignore for our present purposes. As philosophers, we merely argue that there is a need for such limits to wellbeing, and leave the task of setting exact (or even general) thresholds to the environmentalists and ecologists, economists and politicians that are better able to determine the levels at which they ought to be set. The fact that this may prove difficult, however, does not detract from the wider aim of protecting the vulnerable and the environment, nor does it suggest that there ought to be no threshold at all. It merely shows that a good amount of thought must go into the process of establishing where it might sit, to the same extent that speed limits and minimum age requirements for certain activities (themselves both arbitrary thresholds) are also determined through relevant public scrutiny.

### **Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, our underlying contention is that extreme inequality is negative to human society. Of course, some degree of inequality is justifiable and even necessary for

the social good, and we make no attempt to recreate a radical equalitarian view here. We instead argue that extreme poverty, *as well as* extreme wealth must be of concern if we are serious about achieving more just social arrangements. In this sense, policies like universal ‘basic income’ arrangements and donations towards the global poor can only function as an initial first step, and ought to be accompanied by political processes that seek to limit the accumulation and mobilization of enormous wealth and natural resources by a small section of the global community. It is now time to make extreme wealth History!