

# Justice and History: the big problem of Wilt Chamberlain

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## ABSTRACT

*It is well-known that income inequality has risen sharply in the US and in other developed countries of late. One obvious economic solution to high and rising inequality, government redistribution, raises philosophical questions regarding ethics or fairness. In Anarchy, State and Utopia, Robert Nozick raises just such questions. He argues that people have the right to acquire things that result from their sweat and their effort, as long as enough remains for others. Once property is acquired, people have the right to transfer it to others. His famous Wilt Chamberlain example gives this argument concreteness. Nozick has us imagine people attending a basketball game and freely giving Wilt \$1. In this case, Wilt is legitimately entitled to this money. And what is true of Wilt is true of everyone else. Redistribution by the government is therefore neither fair nor just.*

*This paper provides a four-pronged rebuttal to the Wilt Chamberlain example from an economic perspective. First, the Wilt Chamberlain example begins with an assumption that is not likely to be true in the real world—that initial distributions, stretching back in history, are by-and-large just. Second, there is a sort of fallacy of composition in Nozick's argument that is similar to the adding-up problem in economics. Third, good evidence exists that allowing people to freely contribute to Wilt would not yield fair results and there is further evidence that it would hurt others and likely also hurt Wilt. Finally, for John Locke and for the Wilt Chamberlain example, sufficient things must be left over for others at the time property is acquired. This ignores future generations and whether there will be sufficient property available for them.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

IT IS WELL-KNOWN THAT INCOME INEQUALITY HAS RISEN sharply in the US and other developed countries of late (Piketty and Saez 2003, 2007). This has been most pronounced in the US and the UK, but most other developed nations have also seen rising levels of inequality (Atkinson *et al.* 2010; Piketty and Saez 2006). Inequality has also risen sharply in some Scandinavian countries,

such as Finland, which have a long history of substantial income equality (Jäntii 2010; Riihelä *et al.* 2010). These changes can be seen in standard measures of income inequality, such as the Gini coefficient, the Atkinson Index, the Theil Index, the 90/10 ratio and the 90/50 ratio, that are available on the summary statistics page of the Luxembourg Income Study.<sup>2</sup> Scholars tend to mark the turning point in the late 1970s or early 1980s, and most agree that the problem has accelerated over the past decade or so.

One response to rising inequality has been a call for greater government efforts to redistribute income from the very top income earners to those in the middle and the bottom of the income distribution, including higher taxes on the very wealthy and enhanced social insurance and safety net programs to provide additional income to those who have not done well of late (Reich 2010). This position has a long history in economics, going back to A C Pigou (1920) and John Kenneth Galbraith (1958), but it has been pushed more recently by political scientists and sociologists (e.g., Gustafsson and Johansson 1999; Korpi and Palme 2003) as well as by economists.

Another response has been to argue for a basic income guarantee (BIG) because it would lead to greater distributive justice (van Parijs 1995; Zelleke 2005). A BIG would provide everyone with some minimal income and some means to survive during the year. If people are entitled to a set of goods that satisfy their basic human needs, as Sen (1981) argues, government guarantees of a minimum living standard lead to greater justice as well as reduced inequality.

On the other hand, opportunity cost is one of the best-known of all economic ideas. Money to support considerable income redistribution, or to finance a BIG, must come from somewhere. Most government programs are paid for by taxes. Even if the money comes from publicly owned assets (Meade 1993) or royalties from publicly owned land, this still reduces the gains from private ownership and transfers them to the general public.

In his book *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, the philosopher Robert Nozick (1974) raised this question with his famous Wilt Chamberlain example. The example is an important response to efforts that seek to redistribute income or seek to generate greater equality through government fiscal efforts. Similarly, if you can pardon a bad pun, the Wilt Chamberlain is big for BIG. Proponents of BIG have *not* adequately dealt with this challenge. But BIG advocates are not the only ones to blame. Economists, concerned about rising inequality and who favor redistributive economic and social policies as a solution to this problem, have failed to devise an adequate response to Nozick. Philosophers have taken Nozick's argument to task for failing to adhere to the rigors of the principles of formal logic. Their critique, however, has been lost on economists. Partly this is due to the fact that these critiques have mainly been published in philosophy journals and cross-disciplinary reading and fertilization is not that great. But a large part of the reason economists have not paid attention is that the philosophers have made logical arguments that do

not ‘sing’ to economists. These arguments generally concern the formal properties of arguments; this is only natural since this is what philosophers do. For example, Nagel (1975, p. 138) and Ryan (1977, p. 136) argue that Nozick’s case is flawed because of some unpersuasive hidden premises in his argument, such as individuals have rights that may not be transgressed. Economists are less concerned about the formal properties of arguments; they care more about how economic systems function and about the real world consequences of things like inequality and redistribution.

This paper seeks to fill this gap in the literature. It develops a four-pronged rebuttal to the Wilt Chamberlain example that is intended to appeal to economists, and then draws out some of its policy implications. But first we turn to Nozick’s argument.

## 2. THE WILT CHAMBERLAIN EXAMPLE

Wilt Chamberlain was a seven-foot one-inch basketball player, who played for several professional NBA teams from 1959 to 1973. He holds numerous scoring records, including the highest point average for a season (50.4 points in 1961-62) and the remarkable feat of scoring 100 points in a single game in 1962. He was a basketball force to be reckoned with (for more, see Chamberlain 1991; Cherry 2004).

Nozick (1974, p. 161ff.) uses the dominance of Chamberlain on the basketball court and our desire to see him play to argue *against* redistributive tax and spending policies on philosophical grounds. His case is rather simple. Many people would love to watch Wilt score 100 points and would willingly pay a lot of money to attend games where Chamberlain plays on the chance that there would be another record performance. Nozick contends that people have a right to pay Wilt, or transfer money to him, when they go see him play. After all, it is their hard-earned money. And what is true of Wilt is true of everyone else. If we want something from other people, we have a right to spend our money to get it. Exceptions do exist for important collective goods, such as police protection and national defense, and for a few other goods, which I will not discuss here,<sup>3</sup> but there is no exception for redistributive policies. Our right to use our money as we see fit thus precludes tax and spending policies to equalize incomes.

For Nozick, property rights arise from two principles—historical acquisition and legitimate transfer of acquired property. If these two principles are followed, people have the right to what they own and the right to any earnings from their assets (including their labor or human capital).

Nozick’s first principle, the principle of historical acquisition, comes from John Locke ([1690]1953, pp. 130ff.). Locke argued that people have the right to acquire land if their labor improves the land — as long as sufficient land remains for others (of equal or similar quality). Extending Locke, Nozick argues that what is true of land is true of all resources. People have the right

to acquire things that result from their sweat and their effort, so as long as enough remains for others.

Once property is acquired, people have the right to transfer it to others. If my parents acquired their property in a just manner by working hard and saving, and if they will their life savings to me, then I have acquired my wealth in a just manner. I am therefore entitled to own this property and can do with it as I wish.

For Nozick, if an initial distribution of income is just, and if legitimate transfers take place through voluntary and free acts by individuals, the resulting distribution is just. Government efforts to change this outcome violate our principles of justice and so redistribution is *not* just.

The Wilt Chamberlain example gives this argument concreteness. Nozick has us imagine people attending a basketball game and putting money into boxes for each player. Each person freely chooses to give Wilt \$1 (I have converted Nozick's 25 cents to 2012 dollars). This money could have been given to other players, or spent going to the movies, or used to attend an economics conference in New York. If I want to watch Wilt play, and want to give him money for making me happy, I put money into his box. I can do the same for all the other players on his team. If Wilt does not get enough money, presumably, he will have no incentive to play well; or he will decide not to play, and everyone will be disappointed. Essentially, this is how the market economy works-- except that we indirectly pay Wilt by purchasing tickets to the game; Wilt then gets our money from his team as part of the gate proceeds.

### 3. A RESPONSE TO THE WILT CHAMBERLAIN EXAMPLE

This example and argument haunts all redistribution efforts. In many ways, it is a compelling argument. It appeals to the rugged individualist in all of us and our love of freedom. It also yields a powerful conclusion about the injustice of income and wealth redistribution. And, as noted previously, this argument has not been adequately countered by advocates of redistributive economic policies. But the argument has several flaws that I want to tease out here. In what follows, I focus on four key problems.

First, the Wilt Chamberlain example begins with an assumption that is not likely to be true in the real world--namely, that initial distributions are by-and-large just. By the principles of logic, if you start an argument with false premises, you cannot be sure of the truth of your conclusion. Second, there is a sort of fallacy of composition in Nozick's argument. The fallacy of composition involves assuming that what is true of all parts is also true of the whole. Here, what is true of Wilt Chamberlain, and true for every individual, may not be true for everyone together. Third, there are empirical problems with the argument. Good evidence exists that allowing people to freely contribute to Wilt *would not* yield fair results and there is further evidence that it would hurt others and likely also hurt Wilt. Finally, we return to John Locke and some problems with his argument for private property. For Locke, and for the

Wilt Chamberlain example, sufficient things must be left over for others at the time property is acquired. But this fails to account for future generations and whether there will be sufficient property available for them.

### 3.1 Are Initial Distributions Just?

The power of the Wilt Chamberlain example requires that the current income distribution be just. This, in turn, requires a theory of justice. Nozick (1974, p. 152) is clear that 'Justice in holdings is historical; it depends upon what actually has happened.' For a current distribution to be just it is necessary that earlier distributions are just, as well as even earlier distributions going all the way back in human history.

To see why this is so, consider the following. Suppose my ancient ancestors stole food from your ancient ancestors, and that this resulted in great benefits for my ancestors and for all their offspring over many generations, while your ancient ancestors were barely able to survive. As a result of these actions, I start life with a great number of advantages over you. I will likely be healthier and taller due to the benefits of better nutrition through many generations. These traits enable me to earn more money than you. I may also be a better athlete, able to score 100 points in a professional basketball game and command millions of dollars in private transfers each year.

One problem for Nozick is that unjust behaviour was common in human history. The most compelling case for this position was made by economist and philosopher Vivian Walsh in *Scarcity and Evil*. In this work Walsh (1961) argues that in a world of scarcity, survival requires unethical behaviour, and he criticizes philosophers for ignoring the impact of scarcity on human behaviour. In the world inhabited by our ancient ancestors no one knew when they would be able to eat next. Shelter from predators was only temporary at best. And people had to survive frigid winters and dry, hot summers. Most of human history can be described as a struggle to survive.

As Walsh points out, this struggle to survive means that I must cheat, steal, defect in prisoner's dilemma-type games, and maybe even kill my neighbors so that there is sufficient food and clothing for me. My continued existence depends on such behaviour. Moreover, people with such tendencies would more likely survive and pass these behavioural traits to their offspring. For this reason, it is unlikely that human society could have started with anything remotely approaching a just initial accumulation of property. Rather, human history can better be described as a history of injustice that gets perpetuated through time.

To his credit, Nozick (1974, Ch. 7) recognizes this problem and suggests a way to deal with past injustices. His principle of rectification requires figuring out what would have happened, to the best of our ability, if a particular injustice did not occur. Then we must provide appropriate compensation to the wronged party or to the descendants of the wronged party. If I steal \$1000 from you and parlay the money into \$1 million, then I need to com-

pensate you not only for your loss but also for the gains you would have made from this money.

While Nozick is to be commended for trying to deal with past injustices, his response is not adequate to remedy past wrongs, mainly because of what Walsh described—the magnitude of past violations of the principle of just acquisition. We have a few actual estimates of the rectification necessary for enslaving and discriminating against African Americans. James Marketti (1990) has calculated that the gains for whites as a result of enslaving blacks from 1790 to 1860 were between \$2.1 trillion and \$4.7 trillion in 1983 dollars. In 2011 dollars, this comes to between \$4.4 trillion and \$9.8 trillion (with no real gains between 1983 and the present). David Swinton (1990) estimates that labor market discrimination against blacks between 1929 and 1969 cost blacks between \$363 billion and \$1.6 trillion in 1983 dollars (depending on the real rate of return used), or between \$.8 trillion and \$3.4 trillion in 2011 dollars (again, with no real rate of return between 1983 and the present).

As far as I know, there are no estimates for the years between 1860 and 1929, or the years since 1969. Nonetheless, the sums involved are already staggering. Adding everything up, it appears that rectification of past injustices to African Americans would substantially exceed the annual US GDP. And this is only *one problem* that requires restitution. There is also the land that American settlers took from Native Americans, as well as the many cases of fraud in US history, such as Enron, Charles Ponzi and the savings and loan crisis of the 1980s, to take a few famous examples (see Matulich and Currie 2008). It is unlikely that the descendants of those who perpetuated these past injustices could possibly make the appropriate restitution; they don't have the money to do so since some of this money was surely squandered by their ancestors.

In addition to the vast sums that would have to be transferred, there is the problem of finding the appropriate people and actually providing them with restitution. This is at least possible in the case of Native Americans and descendants of former slaves, where we might be able to identify the people deserving restitution. But what about my ancient ancestors who stole from your ancient ancestors, or vice versa? There are no records of such acts and no way to possibly engage in the counterfactuals Nozick proposes. And what about former slaves who are no longer alive and who have no descendants? No rectification is possible here, and according to Nozick's principle of rectification, no rectification would be necessary here. This result reeks of injustice, since some descendants of former slave owners get off the hook because their slaves had no great great grandchildren — a problem that has been pointed out in early critiques of Nozick (see Davis 1976).

Not only will the magnitude of restitution be extremely large; but, as Lerner (1978, p. 53) points out, the entire process of determining who deserves rectification for past injustices and then imposing this result on the population will be costly. Any actual rectification would lead to just the sort of gov-

ernment intervention in economic affairs and just the sort of redistribution that Nozick opposed. Given the total amount to be redistributed (something more than US GDP), if we were to spread out this out over several decades plus add a real rate of return on this amount, it would likely far exceed all current government efforts at redistribution.

Finally, there are conceptual problems with this whole enterprise. Returning to my earlier example, it is not clear whether my compensation for stealing your money should be \$1 million or a smaller sum, since I might have done more with this money than you. There is no way to know this; it is impossible to go back in history and solve this counterfactual. Nozick is clear that he wants restitution based on what the individual stolen from would have done with the money. Yet, it seems wrong or unjust to require greater compensation to those who would have done more with the money stolen from them, and virtually no compensation to an alcoholic or compulsive gambler who would have likely spent the money on a drinking binge or losing all the money playing poker. The initial injustice is the same in both cases, and an historical theory of justice should treat both cases the same.

### *3.2 A Fallacy of Composition or the Adding Up Problem?*

A second problem with the Wilt Chamberlain example concerns its macro aspects. If we follow Nozick's two principles of justice, and we find that Wilt's holdings are justly acquired and also that everyone's holdings are justly acquired, it may still follow that the final distribution is *not* just.

There are two aspects to this problem. The first, initially raised by Cohen (1977), concerns the macroeconomic effects of microeconomic decisions. My \$1 is independent of the \$1 that other people may give to watch Wilt play, and I may think that giving \$1 to watch Wilt play is fine. However, I may not be happy with everyone giving Wilt \$1 and letting Wilt accumulate enormous wealth and great power. This is similar to the problems raised by Thomas Schelling (1978) about residential segregation, where both blacks and whites want to live in a segregated area but one in which their race forms the majority — micro motives can lead to undesirable and unwanted macro consequences.

The second aspect to this problem is the bigger problem here. The problem here is that Wilt does not play alone. Four teammates are always on the court with him. Several players sit on the bench ready to give Wilt some rest during the game, and to play if he fouls out or is injured. Difficulties arise in identifying individual contributions when goods are produced jointly and in rewarding individual efforts based on the total revenues received by the firm. In economics this latter problem is referred to as 'the adding up problem'.<sup>4</sup>

The adding up problem concerns whether the sum of everyone's pay (or their marginal productivity) equals the value of the entire output. If not, there is a problem because either there is too little revenue to pay everyone their contribution to production or we don't know who should get some of the output produced.

Economists Philip Wicksteed and Knut Wicksell first solved this problem. They showed that only with constant returns to scale would the sum of all marginal products (and wages) equal the value of output. The issue then turns on how much output increases as inputs increase. If we double the number of acres used to grow corn and get double the output of corn, there are constant returns to scale. If there is more than double the output, we have increasing returns; and if we get less than double the output, we have diminishing returns to scale. With increasing returns to scale, the sum of marginal products would be greater than the value of output, while diminishing returns would mean that marginal products would be less than total output.

While plots of land may be approximately the same (making the assumption of constant returns somewhat reasonable), people are not all the same and so constant returns will not likely hold. Moreover, it is the differences between people, their varying abilities and skills, which underpin most arguments that support the existing distribution of income. This is certainly true on the basketball court and is particularly true for Nozick's Wilt Chamberlain example. Think about adding players to Wilt's team. Since they will not score as much as Wilt, or be as popular, they produce less value than Wilt. Nozick's own example then has diminishing returns, and so it is a case in which the total output is greater than the sum of marginal productivities. In economic jargon, there is a surplus of sorts. The problem becomes who gets the surplus and what makes the actual division of this surplus just? Traditional economics provides no answer to this question. In a social world, the division of the output or total income must be determined not by economic concepts such as marginal productivity, but by power relationships and by negotiations among the players or producers. Only by ignoring the social aspect of production, can standard economic analysis and Nozick claim that incomes should be distributed based on everyone's contribution to production.

Focusing on people making contributions to Wilt when they go see him play is a clever way of trying to finesse the adding up problem. If actual donations go to Wilt, Wilt gets paid the monetary value of the utility he provides to those wanting to see him play. The same thing is true for all his teammates. It appears that we don't have to worry about the adding up problem. Every player receives their value to the fans.<sup>5</sup>

However, looking at individual contributions does not really get us out of the adding up problem. People do not *want* to see Wilt's *backups* (those people who mainly sit on the bench waiting for Wilt to get tired or in foul trouble) play at all, since Wilt is not on the court and cannot score points. Players on the bench will therefore receive little or no contributions. This makes it less likely that Wilt will actually have a backup, since who would want this job for little or no pay? But, as economic theory stresses, people need to get paid their contributions to production; otherwise they will go elsewhere and find someone willing to pay them their contribution to production. If Wilt must play the whole game every night, he will get tired and perform less well. So his teammates do

contribute something, even if it cannot be seen and even if their contributions do not get compensated through voluntary contributions at the gate.

The problem here is that the team is *not* the sum of all individual players. Wilt does not play alone and cannot score on his own. He requires help from teammates. They must get him the ball, play defense, and substitute for him so that he can get some rest during the game. They must also be good friends, or at least pleasant to Wilt, so that locker room problems do not distract Wilt when he is playing.

In brief, Wilt's productivity depends on others and cannot be separated from his teammates. These social aspects of production generally go unseen and unmeasured; they may even be unmeasurable. In terms of Nozick's example, this means that individual contributions to Wilt should *not* go just to Wilt. They should go to Wilt and his teammates, who get him the ball near the basket, thereby enabling him to score lots of points. They go to his backups, whose presence enables Wilt to play hard every night. In sum, there is no unique payment to Wilt in a philosophical sense, although in a physical sense there is — this is what people transfer to Wilt when they make their voluntary contributions to him at the door.

### *3.3 Some Empirical Problems*

A third problem with the Wilt Chamberlain example is empirical in nature. It concerns the fairness of letting Wilt earn an enormous income and the consequences of great income inequality. Granted that Nozick claims to be providing a logical theory of justice, or a theory not based on empirical arguments. However, his book is full of empirical cases — including the Wilt Chamberlain example itself. At bottom the example appeals to our 'moral intuitions' which is an empirical matter to some extent. Empirical issues creep into Nozick's argument at several other places. For example, Nozick (1974, p. 33) claims that individual rights derive from the fact that people are unique and each different individual has just one life. Moreover, it is not clear that there is a sharp distinction between empirical and theoretical statements and arguments. As philosopher W V O Quine (1953) argues, these are not completely separate and distinct categories; there is considerable overlap between the two.

This raises the question as to whether the Wilt Chamberlain example yields a just distribution of income. Seeking such evidence, economist James Konow (2003) surveyed a number of people regarding Michael Jordan at the end of his long and distinguished basketball career. He described people dropping money into a box as they went to see him play, and told his subjects that Michael receives an annual income of \$25 million from these payments (a figure below his actual salary). Konow then asked people whether this outcome was fair. His findings do not provide much support for Nozick's theory of justice. Fifty-nine percent of people thought that the earnings distribution from this system was *not* fair, and 76 percent wanted to make the distribution fairer by reducing Michael's pay in some manner (Konow 2003, p. 1206f.).

Even if not perfectly just, most economists think that inequality provides the incentives necessary for economic growth, which then improves everyone's standard of living. Inequality might then be regarded as *nearly just* since it can make *everyone* better off in absolute terms without making anyone worse off in absolute terms.

This too is an empirical question. In fact, many studies have examined the impact of high prize money in sporting events, where it is relatively easy to measure performance and pay dispersion. Early research found that individual performance was greater when the relative rewards were greater. Becker and Huselid (1992) found that larger spreads between winning prizes and other prizes led to better performance by race car drivers. Similar results were found for golfers on the European professional golf tour (Ehrenberg and Bognano 1992).

But there are other sports. Many are team sports like baseball, cricket, hockey, and yes, Wilt's sport — basketball. The results here fail to support the view that inequality leads to better outcomes. Examining salary data and performance statistics from 29 baseball teams over the years 1985 through 1993, Bloom (1999) found that greater pay dispersion led to worse player and worse team performance. There is also a whole world outside the world of sports. Looking at academia, Pfeffer and Langton (1993) found that greater pay dispersion led to less collaboration and lower productivity among academics. Cowherd and Levine (1992) examined manufacturing firms and found that greater pay dispersion led to lower product quality. Finally, Bloom & Michel (2002) found that organizations with greater pay dispersion had higher turnover rates among managers, contributing to worse productivity performance for the firm. The evidence is thus quite strong that large pay differentials *hurt* firm performance, which reduces employee living standards.

At the macroeconomic level, additional evidence supports the view that inequality hurts the overall economy. Many studies have found that inequality leads to slower economic growth overall (Alesina and Rodrik 1992, 1994; Deininger and Squire 1998; Lundberg and Squire 2003). One mechanism by which this might occur is through the impact of inequality on demand (Brown 2004; Pressman 1997). Or it could be some social-psychological process, as explained in the previous paragraph, whereby inequality leads to less collaboration and lower levels of social efficiency. Another mechanism is the impact of growing up poor on future earnings (Holzer *et al.* 2007). Finally, we know that inequality creates considerable stress for those lower down on the income ladder and that this stress causes health problems (Marmot 2004; Wilkinson 1994, 1996, 2000). Unhealthy employees will undoubtedly be less productive workers, and so an economy with greater inequality grows more slowly.

### 3.4 Some Problems with John Locke

Finally, there is a logical flaw in Nozick's argument regarding justice in the acquisition of property. For Nozick, as for Locke before him, the acquisition of

property is just only if sufficient property (of equally good value) is left over for others. One key word that gets left out of at the end of this argument is the word 'now'. For Locke and for Nozick, property acquisition is just only if sufficient property remains for others who are alive at the time of initial acquisition. The problem is that this ignores all future generations. It assumes that if there are sufficient resources for others now, there will also be sufficient resources for others in the future. Or, it implicitly assumes that the population will not grow and that natural resources will not dwindle and become depleted in the future. To take a simple real world case, my consumption of gasoline today may leave sufficient gasoline for everyone else today, but that does not mean that there will be sufficient gasoline available for everyone 20 or 50 years from today.

Ignoring the possibility of future shortages was understandable at the time when John Locke was writing. No one was concerned about overpopulation or running out of fossil fuels in the late 17th century. Robert Malthus [1798] (1999) first raised the issue of overpopulation and insufficient food in his famous *Essay on Population*, but this was a century after Locke. Moreover, his views were harshly criticized at the time, leading Malthus to water down his pessimistic conclusion in later editions of the population essay. In the mid 19th century, the economist William Stanley Jevons (1865) worried about the depletion of coal resources in England and purchased a lifetime supply of paper in order to prepare for the deforestation he felt was immanent. This too was a minority view at the time, and even seemed quirky to Keynes [1936](1951) in the early part of 20th century, when he wrote a biographical essay on Jevons.

However, when Nozick was writing *Anarchy, State and Utopia* it was no longer reasonable to assume that there would be sufficient resources in the future. By the late 1960s and early 1970s many people were pointing out the problems stemming from a rising population and dwindling natural resources (Boulding 1966; Georgescu-Roegen 1971; Meadows 1972; Mishan 1967). There were numerous calls for achieving steady-state growth as quickly as possible to avoid environmental disaster (Daly 1971; Holdren and Ehrlich 1971; Schumacher 1973). And, of course, in the early 1970s we faced the first energy crisis, with long lines, rationing, and sharply rising prices.

Nozick could not have been oblivious to this. He must have known that because sufficient land or resources were left for others at some point in time it did *not* mean that this would also be true in several generations. He knew that we could run out of land and fossil fuels, and that private ownership could lead to serious ecological problems in the future. Yet his principles of justice fail to provide any guidance for dealing with such issues of intergenerational justice.

The problem here is that for Nozick justice is backward looking, but not forward looking. Justice is about what happened in the past; any consequences for future generations are ignored. This is a big omission for someone

who takes an historical view of justice. Its consequences are deadly for the Wilt Chamberlain example, or if you will pardon another bad pun, it is a slam dunk against the Wilt Chamberlain example. It means that even if acquisitions are presently just, based on historical acquisition and just transfers, they may not be just tomorrow or next year. And if they are not just tomorrow, there is no reason to refrain from employing redistributive policies tomorrow — even if property has been justly acquired and transferred up to today.

#### 4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF REJECTING THE CHAMBERLAIN EXAMPLE

Let me conclude by summarizing my arguments and drawing out some of their policy implications. I have shown that the Wilt Chamberlain argument against redistributive economic policies has four flaws. It ignores actual history, it ignores the fact that goods are produced jointly with others, it ignores a good deal of empirical evidence, and it ignores the future.

These arguments, it should be noted, do not support a BIG or any other sort of redistributive government policy. They only deal with a particular case against such policies. They show that libertarian arguments against redistribution are *not sound* for economic reasons. However, having shown these problems with Nozick's argument, they also open the door for redistributive policies. The key questions concerning such policies are what should be done and how much should be done.

Incentives *are* important at some times and some places. However, they *are not* the be all and end all of human behaviour. A good deal of empirical work on the impact of redistributive policies (both progressive taxes and progressive spending programs) has shown that these government programs do not seem to have large adverse effects while at the same time they provide much needed assistance to the poor and the middle class (Pressman 2002-03, 2005).

To take just one real world example, the existence of child allowances is one key factor in reducing child poverty in developed nations (Rainwater & Smeeding 2003; Pressman 2011). It was a key component in Prime Minister Tony Blair's plan to end child poverty in Britain by 2020 (Waldfoegel 2010). A Nozickean position, following from the Wilt Chamberlain example, would preclude such benefits. Any child allowance program must tax households without children to provide income supports to those with children. For Nozick, such transfers would violate principles of justice. Eliminating this appeal to what Nozick considers just, merely returns us to the more pragmatic questions of economic and social policy — what works to improve the lifetime income of children, how much do various policies cost, what are the long-run benefits, and what are economic consequences of any taxes necessary to make these transfers? Not burdened by a flawed philosophical case against any redistribution, it is to these practical issues that we now must turn.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Department of Economics and Finance, Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ 07764. [pressman@monmouth.edu](mailto:pressman@monmouth.edu). The author thanks two anonymous referees for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.
2. These are available at <http://www.lisproject.org/key-figures/key-figures.htm>.
3. These exceptions include things like taking advantage of minors or those who are incapable of rational thought and behaviour, taking advantage of the poor, and obtaining things that might be dangerous to large numbers of people.
4. Of course, there is another logical problem here, one raised by Sraffa and Robinson, and that developed into the Cambridge Controversy (see Harcourt 1972). These problems lie outside the scope of this paper.
5. This move, as well as the entire example, also suffers from the free rider problem. Why not just go see Wilt play while letting others contribute to him? This subject cannot be dealt with adequately here and warrants another paper.

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