

Candidate name: Adrian

Candidate surname: Mehran

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### **What Is Your Fair Share of What Someone Else Has Earned?**

We live in an increasingly interdependent and connected world where individual success is inextricably intertwined with collective effort, blurring the boundaries between true personal merit and social frameworks. Globalization, cultural integration and technological progress have reshaped our world into a tightly knit global community where the borders of “I” and “You” have dissolved into a greater “We”. This question challenges us to ethically balance personal achievement with the indispensable social structures that make such success possible. It is not merely an economic issue but a deeper philosophical inquiry into the tension between individualism and collectivism.

This essay explores the issue not only as an economic debate over individual merit and collective welfare, but also as a wider ethical dilemma on fairness, justice and merit. Drawing on insights from major philosophers, economists and political theorists, the essay examines this complex and contentious question from different perspectives, contending that while individual effort deserves recognition, a truly just society must also acknowledge the social, historical and structural contributions that enable achievement.

## **Fair Share & Justice**

Although equality was confined to a privileged male minority in ancient Greece, Aristotle defined justice as a moral virtue that ensured each person received their rightful due under the law (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 126–28). Aristotle also advanced the principle of proportional equality, suggesting that equal people should be treated equally, and unequal people should be treated unequally proportionate to their differences (Aristotle, *Politics* 187–91). Aristotle’s definition of fairness acknowledged differences among individuals and treated them according to their merits, virtues and contributions to society.

The American philosopher John Rawls posits that a society is truly just only when its inequalities are arranged to benefit the least fortunate members (Rawls 75). Rawls’ work defined justice as fairness, advocating for a society based on freedom, impartiality and equal opportunity (Rawls 3, 11–13, 31). Rawls’ theory of justice supports wealth redistribution as a requirement for a just society but does not recognize one person having moral rights on another man’s earnings (Rawls 54).

From a different perspective, Confucius, one of the most influential Eastern philosophers, viewed ethical conduct not just as a personal duty, but as a social obligation characterized by empathy and respect for others (Yao 30–33). Similarly, Islam views ethics and fairness at the heart of justice. Accountability before God, compassion and equilibrium are defined as spiritual duties of all Muslims on the road to divine submission, governing both personal conduct and communal life (Barry et al. 12, 18–20).

In defining fair share, Western thought emphasizes individual rights, merit, and ownership, while Eastern philosophy highlights harmony, communal duty and interdependence. Determining a fair share of someone else's earnings demands an ethical weighing of individual merit against the imperatives of equal opportunity, social justice, and the broader moral duties we have towards society.

### **Property Rights & Entitlement**

In stark contrast to Rawls, the 18<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher John Locke argued that labor justifies ownership and sharing the fruits of another man's efforts violated his natural rights (Locke 209–11). Therefore, according to Locke, one's fair share of someone else's earnings is fundamentally nothing. Similarly, the Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith posited that labor is the primary source of wealth and that every individual is entitled to own the wealth that he has rightfully earned through his labor (Smith, *Wealth of Nations* 120). Property rights, market self-regulation and individual self-interest were foundational to Smith's economic theories (Smith, *Wealth of Nations* 55, 66, 98–100, 107–114).

On the contrary, the contemporary American political philosopher Michael Sandel argued that wealth, in addition to individual merit, is due to a collective effort also requiring opportunity, support, societal structures, and luck (Sandel 123). Sandel also warned that a society solely built on meritocracy can be subject to moral corruption and "Hubris" — the belief that one's accomplishments are purely due to personal effort (Sandel 13–15, 120–23). His work challenges the theories of Locke and Smith arguing that while individual wealth relies on social systems, unregulated markets are often unfair and generate inequality. Sandel's work suggests that

although one man is not inherently entitled to a share of another man's earnings, redistribution of wealth is morally fair due to the collective frameworks that enable success (Sandel 120–23, 140–42).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and economist Karl Marx strongly opposed private property rights arguing that it was a source for inequality. He further advanced that private ownership of factories and land leads to exploitation of the working class by the capitalist class, and called for the abolition of private property (Marx and Engels 22). Marx also disputed Locke and Smith on the desire of every man to acquire property as the fruit of his labor, laying the groundwork for his economic independence and personal freedom, contending that land should be collectively owned (Marx and Engels 22).

Eastern philosophy views property rights not as absolute entitlements, but as interdependent and custodial relationships. Islam views property rights as a trust from God, advancing the concept of dual ownership. Moreover, regarding all entitlement, individual rights are balanced with communal welfare and economic equity (Sait and Lim 1, 31). In Hinduism property rights are founded on the concept of “Dharma” meaning duty and righteousness, and are deeply linked with family values and social order (Leaman 42–44). Equally, Buddhism views property rights not as total ownership, advocating for greater moral responsibility while cautioning against excessive attachment to possessions — seen as detrimental to well-being and spiritual progress (Leaman 67–68, 128).

In Eastern philosophy, the concept of ownership is governed by the belief that all things ultimately belong to God, emphasizing principles of social harmony, non-attachment and

interdependence. From this perspective, a fair share of someone else's earnings is intimately woven with the context of spirituality and collective well-being.

## **Redistribution**

Marx argued that accumulation of wealth by the rich is often the result of systematic exploitation of the poor rather than pure individual merit as advanced by Locke and Smith (Marx and Engels 22–23). He also called on central governments to correct historical injustices and redistribute wealth (Marx and Engels 24). However, Marx's theories failed to consider individual initiative necessary for innovation and human progress. While Marx's predictions for the fall of capitalism proved incorrect, his argument regarding market mechanisms creating inequality in society remains relevant today in debates on social justice.

In contrast, the contemporary American economist Milton Friedman warns against excessive government intervention and its ability to fairly redistribute wealth (Friedman 64–68). He believes that although imperfect, markets create equal opportunity and social equality. While Marx calls on governments to establish order and social justice, Friedman argues that government redistribution threatens innovation and hard work.

In practice, we have advocates for both schools of thought. Nordic countries have historically maintained high tax rates along with extensive social services to reduce inequality and poverty. In contrast, the United States and Singapore favor low taxation in order to stimulate growth ("List of Countries"). But in light of the fact that the world's top 1% own approximately 43% of global financial assets — more than the bottom 95% ("World's Top 1%") — isn't it reasonable to

challenge the works of Locke and Friedman and impose higher taxes on the super-rich? Meanwhile, countries like Venezuela, Iran and Cuba are examples of failed wealth redistribution due to poor management and corruption.

## **Social Cohesion**

Adam Smith's theories recognized the importance of collective cohesion and stability (Smith, *Moral Sentiments* 10, 70–74, 93), but acknowledged that wealth accumulation endorses social inequality (Smith, *Wealth of Nations* 135–39). Yet Marx argued that capitalism inherently undermines social solidarity because it creates class struggle and division leading to reduced social relationships and increased inequalities (Marx and Engels 15–17).

Economist Thomas Piketty argued that when the rate of return on capital exceeds the rate of growth of the economy, it generates inequalities. Accordingly, he supported redistribution to fight wealth gaps and establish social cohesion (Piketty 336–37, 353–58). However, many critics believe that social cohesion undermines personal motivation, hard work and innovation.

Eastern philosophies suggest that personal well-being and social bonds are closely linked to social cohesion and economic stability. Confucius teachings center on interactions and responsibilities towards others (Yao 34). Buddhism highlights the importance of compassion, interconnectedness and social harmony (Leaman 53–54, 65, 85, 118). Consequently, a fair share in another's earnings can also be viewed as an ethical imperative for social solidarity, collective prosperity and balance.

## **Moral Responsibility**

Adam Smith viewed individual ethical responsibility and collective prosperity as fundamental components of a just and balanced society, and emphasized empathy and moral duty as foundations of ethical behavior (Smith, *Moral Sentiments* 4–6). He also argued that pursuit of wealth should be subject to moral principles, and promoted collective well-being and ethical standards for markets (Smith, *Moral Sentiments* 84–85, 105–08, 119–25, 141–43, 265–66). Through the concept of the ‘invisible hand’, Smith argued that due to the mechanism of the free market, individuals acting in their own self-interest engage in production and exchange to maximize their profits, inadvertently promoting the public good and benefiting society as a whole (Smith, *Moral Sentiments* 258, 264–65).

The Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who endured Soviet repression, highlighted that the Soviet Union collapsed because it failed to recognize human dignity and self-worth. He argued that a just society should balance wealth redistribution with the protection of individual freedoms and incentives (Solzhenitsyn 610–11).

Contrary to the Western perspective centered on individualism, Eastern philosophy views moral responsibility and ethical conduct as not just personal duties, but as broader social obligations (Leaman 40–41, 55–56, 86–87).

As the son of Iranian immigrants who left everything behind to seek freedom and justice in France, I believe the question is not just about material wealth and earnings, but also about our ethical inheritance. The rights and opportunities we enjoy today are the result of generations of struggle and sacrifice. We must recognize that our lives are not only shaped by our personal achievements, but also by our ethical heritage. From Gandhi’s nonviolent resistance to Martin

Luther King Jr.'s dream of a fair society, from Mandela's fight against apartheid to the quiet defiance of Rosa Parks, and most recently, the tragic death of Mahsa Amini protesting Iran's mandatory hijab law, we are reminded that the fair laws and liberties we now enjoy were once hard-fought dreams. It is our individual ethical responsibility to share a portion of our earnings in order to preserve and expand these rights and privileges to all people across the world.

## **Conclusion**

There is no single answer or formula to what constitutes a "fair share" of someone else's earnings, since what is considered fair in one society may not be fair in another. No individual achievement is exclusively the work of one person and a just society should reward personal effort and innovation while acknowledging collective structures that enable such achievement.

Ironically, perhaps the answer lies in how much we are willing to share and care for others. It is through empathy, compassion and preserving the dignity of others that fairness gains meaning.

I wish to close this essay with the timeless words of Persian poet Sa'di that adorn the walls of the United Nations in New York:

All human beings are members of one frame,

Since all, at first, from the same essence came.

When time afflicts a limb with pain,

The other limbs cannot at rest remain.

If thou feel not for other's misery,

A human being is no name for thee (Sa'di qtd. in "Persian Carpet").

In a world increasingly divided by social and economic disparities, Sa'di's words remind us of the need for empathy, solidarity and recognition of our shared humanity. We need to honor individual merit, yet recognize our ethical duty to share a portion of our earnings for the collective good — not just because it's fair, but because we are all members of the human race. It is only by sharing the pain and suffering of others that we can preserve humanity's survival.

Adrian Mehran

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