Wealth, Power, and Equality

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Abstract
I spell out a distinctive account of what is wrong with inequalities of wealth: they constitute asymmetries of power. Two ideas lie behind this view. The first is that asymmetries of power constitute inegalitarian relationships. Think of the relationship of king to subject or master to slave: these are in part constituted by asymmetric power. The second is that wealth gives one power over people. When you have a lot of money, you can pay people to do what you want, and that gives you power over them. Inequalities of wealth, by constituting asymmetries of power, thus constitute objectionably inegalitarian relationships.

1. Introduction

What is wrong with inequalities of wealth? In this paper, I argue that it is that they constitute asymmetries of power. Two ideas are core to this view. The first is that inequalities of wealth do indeed constitute power asymmetries. They do so because relative wealth allows you to pay people to do what you want. Jeff Bezos can pay you to be his personal assistant or to help him build rocket ships. He can affect your life by paying you money to do things. This gives him power over you. The second is that asymmetries of power constitute objectionably inegalitarian relationships. Think of the relationship of master to slave or dictator to subject. These relationships are in part constituted by power asymmetries. And they are morally objectionable. We have claims against being subjected to such relationships. It follows that inequalities of wealth, by constituting asymmetries of power, constitute objectionably inegalitarian relationships. This identifies a very serious objection to inequalities of wealth. Let's call this The Power View. My aim in this paper is to articulate and defend this view.

The Power View doesn't identify the only problem with inequalities of wealth. There are, plausibly, many such problems (*cf.* Scanlon, 2018). But it identifies a particularly robust problem. Some people think that the chief problem with vast wealth inequalities

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is that they cause inequalities of influence over government policymaking.[1] The thought is that the rich can buy influence through donations and lobbying. This is a serious problem with wealth inequalities, especially in the United States. But it is also one that can be straightforwardly addressed. We can ban private donations to politicians. We can restrict lobbying activities. To a large extent, such policies sever the connection between inequalities of wealth and inequalities of political influence.[2] That's why money buys much less political influence in Sweden than in the US. In contrast, the problem identified by the Power View exists regardless of whether we prevent the conversion of money into political influence. The rich can pay us to do things regardless of whether we ban private donations to political parties.

The Power View also identifies a problem that requires a distinctively stringent public policy response. Some people think that the chief problem with inequalities of wealth is that they lead to inequalities of consumption, and thus perhaps to inequalities of well-being or social status. The problem is that such inequalities mean we're not giving everyone enough resources, or at least that we're not maximizing benefits to the worse off.[3] This view supports taking some resources from the rich and giving them to the poor. But the redistribution this view supports falls far short of that required for full material equality. Everyone can get enough, despite some having billions of dollars. We can maximize benefits to the worst off, in some cases, precisely by supporting some inequalities – those that incentivize hard work. In contrast, to solve the problem identified by The Power View we have to fully equalize the distribution of wealth. We need strict material equality.

[1] For mentions of this view, see (Arneson, 2022; Anderson, 1999, p. 326; Scheffler, 2003, p. 22; O'Neill, 2008, pp. 126–128; Scanlon, 2018, pp. 74–94; Schemmel, 2021, pp. 242–247).

[2] For evidence see (Malhotra, 2008; Norris *et al*., 2016). My experience is that American writers sometimes confuse a problem that is intractable in the US, with its dysfunctional politics, with a problem that is intractable generally.

[3] For the sufficientarian view, see Anderson (1999, p. 326) or Frankfurt (2015). For the prioritarian view, see, obviously, Rawls (1971). Some instead think that inequalities of well-being are bad in themselves (*e.g.* Temkin, 1993). But I think levelling down arguments make such views hard to sustain (Parfit, 1997).

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The Power View is interesting, then, because it is more radical – more stringent and robust – than many other accounts of distributive justice. I believe that it also correctly identifies a very weighty objection to wealth inequalities. In the next section I'll articulate the view in more detail. In Section 3, I'll defend the idea that inequalities of wealth constitute asymmetries of power. In Sections 4 and 5 I'll defend the idea that the relevant asymmetries of power ground objectionably inegalitarian relationships. Overall, a particularly straightforward picture of inegalitarian relationships emerges from this – they can be understood wholly in terms of power asymmetries. And this picture generates a particularly serious objection to inequalities of wealth.

2. The Power View

Let's start by laying out the intellectual basis of The Power View. It is a relational account of what's wrong with wealth inequalities. The idea is that we can somehow trace the problem to inegalitarian relationships. To get a grip on these relationships, think about the relationship of king to subject, or lord to peasant, or master to slave. These are all relationships of superiority and inferiority. They are relationships of hierarchy, of subordination and domination. The Power View says that the relationship between rich and poor is normatively akin to these relationships.

There are, however, two different strands in relational egalitarian thought. One strand focuses on the attitudes inegalitarian relationships instantiate or express.[4] The paradigm cases motivating this strand are cases such as racism and sexism in the modern United States. Consider race relations in the 1960s South. Black people were often demeaned or less esteemed than their white compatriots. Many white people saw their Black co-citizens as moral inferiors. The first strand of relational egalitarian thought puts such attitudes at the core of inegalitarian relationships. It says that inegalitarian relationships are really constituted by patterns of such attitudes, by disparities of esteem and respect. This strand has often been linked to distributive justice. The idea is that inequalities of wealth tend to

[4] Wolff (1998), Anderson (1999), Fourie (2012), Elford (2017) and Lippert-Rasmussen (2018, Ch. 3) all, I think, belong to this strand. These writers don't deny that power matters to inegalitarian relationships, but they emphasize attitudes.

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generate disparities in esteem: people show deference to the rich and contempt to the poor.[5] I'll say more about this position in Section 4. But for now let's just observe that it again identifies at most a somewhat contingent problem with wealth inequalities. We could set up social norms that forbid apportioning esteem on the basis of material wealth, that identified conspicuous consumption as shameful and accumulation as wasteful. This would sever the link between inequalities of wealth and disparities of esteem.[6]

The second strand in relational egalitarian thought focuses not on the attitudes people have towards each other, but on the power that they wield. The paradigm cases motivating this strand are relationships like that of dictator to subject or master to slave. Dictators might not think their subjects are their moral inferiors. Yet they wield enormously asymmetric power over them. The idea is that such power inequalities create an inegalitarian relationship between the two. This strand of thought comes out of democratic theory. The idea is that democracy is worthwhile because it helps preclude such inegalitarian relationships.[7] Political power in democracies is distributed relatively equally. This helps reduce the kind of relational inequalities that are prevalent in more autocratic regimes. In conceptualizing inegalitarian relationships, the focus is on how they connect to asymmetries of power.

The Power View is rooted in this second strand of relational egalitarian thought. It says that the rich have asymmetric power over the poor, in virtue of the fact that they can pay them to do what they want. This creates an inegalitarian relationship between rich and poor akin to (although less severe than) that between king and subject. To be clear, the issue here is not that rich people as a class have power over poor people as a class. The issue is that dyadic relationships between each rich person and each poor person are objectionable. How exactly should we understand the objection to these relationships? We should understand it in terms of claims or

[5] Schemmel (2021, pp. 247–252) discusses this view, as do Scheffler (2003, p. 22), O'Neill (2008, pp. 126–128) and Scanlon (2018, pp. 26–40).

[6] Schemmel (2021, p. 242) calls this a 'socio-psychological' strategy for addressing wealth inequalities.

[7] See Kolodny (2014; 2023), Viehoff (2014; 2019), A. Lovett and Zuehl (2022) and A. Lovett (2024a). Work by neo-republicans, such as Pettit (1997) and F. Lovett (2010), prefigures these relational egalitarian views. Note that Pettit thinks that whenever someone has (arbitrary) power over you, you're dominated by them. He doesn't require power to be asymmetrically distributed to be objectionable.

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rights (Kolodny, 2023). We have many basic moral claims. We have, for example, a claim to bodily integrity. People owe it to us not to touch us without permission; we have a right to control our bodies. Similarly, we have claims against being subordinated. People owe it to us not to subject us to inegalitarian relationships. We have a right not to be made into inferiors. If inegalitarian relationships are constituted by asymmetries of power, then we have a right not to be subjected to asymmetric power.

We've just laid out the first premise behind The Power View – the idea that inegalitarian relationships are constituted by asymmetries of power. The second premise is that inequalities of wealth give rise to such power asymmetries. Here we can think of wealth as a measure of one's *de facto* control of resources; one's ability to give away, exchange, destroy or control goods and services. One has wealth insofar as one is in fact able to control what is done with certain such things. In our societies, that is in large part a function of how much money one has access to. The key thought here is that inequalities in such wealth give rise to the kind of power asymmetries that constitute relationships of subordination. In the next section, we'll investigate this premise in more depth.

3. What is Power?

There are many notions of power. What kind of power constitutes relationships of subordination? The two most plausible answers to this question point to influence over behaviour and influence over well-being respectively. The *behavioural view* says that one person has subordinating power over another insofar as that person can affect the other person's behaviour.[8] They are able to get them to do things. The *welfarist view* says that one person has subordinating power over another insofar as that person can affect the other people's well-being. They are able to affect how well their life is going.[9] And one can of course be a pluralist about subordinating power. One could think that both the ability to affect someone's behaviour and the ability to affect someone's well-being gives you power over them.

[8] This conception of power was popular among mid-century social scientists (March, 1955; Dahl, 1957; Harsanyi, 1962). For more recent endorsements, see F. Lovett (2010) or Forst (2015).

[9] For this view, see Goldman (1972, p. 258) and Lukes (2005, pp. 29–38).

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Both views imply that inequalities of wealth generate asymmetries of power. Consider first the behavioural view. The wealthier you are than other people, the more money you can offer them to do what you want them to do. Elon Musk can pay you to be his bodyguard for the day. Of course, you might not do anything for money. Maybe you wouldn't be Musk's bodyguard even if he offered you a billion dollars. Still, people very often do accept offers of money to do things. This is simply because money helps most of us achieve many of our goals, and it is instrumentally rational to take the effective means to our goals. And so, if power is the ability to affect what people do, money is power.

Consider now the well-being view. The wealthier you are than other people, the more you can improve their lives. Bill Gates could enormously improve your life by giving you a billion dollars. This is simply because a lot of the things you can buy with money would make your life better. You could quit your job and go travelling, buy an enormous house, lavish your friends and family with gifts, enjoy lifetime economic security and so on and so forth. So, if power is the ability to affect people's well-being, then inequalities of wealth constitute asymmetries of power. And of course if one has a pluralistic view of power, then wealth will also constitute power: it gives you both the ability to affect people's behaviour and to affect their well-being. It's not obvious what power could be except the ability to affect one of these things. So it seems that there's a strong *prima facie* case that material inequalities ground asymmetries of power.

I think there's only one obvious way to resist this argument. One might think that subordinating power isn't the ability to affect people's life in general, but rather just the ability to affect their life negatively.[10] This is naturally seen as a modification of the welfarist view of power. The view I outlined said that being able to either improve or worsen someone's life gives you power over them. This alternative view, call it the *negative welfarist view*, says that only being able to worsen someone's life gives you power over them. This might allow us to resist the conclusion that wealth gives one power. The point is that wealth usually gives one the ability to affect people's well-being by making their life better. When you give people money, you improve their life. If this doesn't give you power over them, as on this negative welfarist view, then money isn't power.

But this negative welfarist view is unappealing. For a start, it is *ad hoc*. If power is all about the ability to affect well-being, why

[10] Pettit (1997, p. 52) takes this kind of view, but doesn't defend it.

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think only the ability to affect well-being in one kind of way matters? But, more concretely, the view is too restrictive. To see that, consider the following case. Imagine that you suffer from a rare and lethal illness. You'll die without the regular administration of a cure. Fortunately, a doctor synthesizes a cure for your illness. The doctor says he'll give you the cure on one condition: you become his servant. You accept. In this case, it seems to me that once the doctor has the cure in hand, he has subordinating power over you. Yet his power is merely the ability to refrain from improving your life. His withholding the cure doesn't worsen your situation – without his efforts, you'll die anyway. So it seems the power to improve someone's life can be subordinating. And so the negative welfarist view is too restrictive.

This provides a strong case, I think, that the rich have power over the rest of us in virtue of their being able to pay us to do things. Let me make one final comment on this point. Previously, I pointed out that, if this is a problem, it is a much more robust problem than many other problems with inequalities of wealth. We can now see why that is. It is because there is a very tight connection between wealth and power. Part of what it is to have wealth – to control monetary resources – is to be able to pay people to do things. Ownership consists in such control. Labour laws do restrict this in some ways. But wholly restricting the exchange of money for services would be tantamount to expropriation. So the connection between inequalities of wealth and asymmetries of power is very robust. The connection between wealth inequalities and, say, unequal influence over public policy is far more contingent. This connection runs through identifiable causal mechanisms (in the U.S, primarily donations and lobbying) and those mechanisms can be severed.[11] The connection between wealth and power flows from the very nature of ownership.

4. Are Power Asymmetries Always Objectionable?

The Power View rests on the idea that inegalitarian relationships are constituted by asymmetries of power. The initial motivation for this idea comes from paradigm examples of inegalitarian relationships. Consider the relationship of king to subject, lord to peasant,

[11] These, at least, are the primary mechanisms identified in empirical work (*e.g.* Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2012). For more discussion of these mechanisms, see Barber (2016b; 2016a) and Hall and Deardorff (2006).

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master to slave. These are all inegalitarian relationships and are all shot through with power asymmetries. Masters have deeply asymmetric power over their slaves; lords had deeply asymmetric power over their serfs. This makes it very natural to suppose that these power asymmetries constitute such inegalitarian relationships. This supposition helps explain why all these relationships seem inegalitarian. Still, one might resist the idea that *all* power asymmetries are objectionable. One might think there are obvious counterexamples to this thought, and so one might resist the idea that the power asymmetries that characterize wealth inequalities are objectionable. In this section, I'll address such counterexamples.[12]

4.1. Disanalogous Cases

The most interesting cases are ones which genuinely show that not all power asymmetries are objectionable. In this subsection, I show that the reasons these asymmetries aren't objectionable fail to apply to the relationship between rich and poor. Consider, for example, parent-child relationships. Parents have deeply asymmetric power over their children. Parents control the lives of their children, often in minute detail. Yet parent-child relationships are not deeply objectionable. Why is that? I believe it is because children have limited rational capacities. They're not, for example, good at instrumental reasoning. This weakens many of their moral claims. It weakens their claim to bodily integrity: you don't wrong your children by insisting they undergo a life-saving operation, even if they fail to consent to it. And it weakens their claim against subordination. You don't wrong your children by having power over them. But this won't extend to the relationship between wealthy and not wealthy adults. That one doesn't have a billion dollars does not show that one has limited rational capacities.

To be clear, the more developed are your rational capacities, the weightier is your claim against subordination. Everything that exhibits even minimal rational capacities has some claim against subordination, but as you gain a greater ability to reason about your ends and the means to them, your claim against being subjected to an inegalitarian relationship gets weightier (probably nonlinearly). The same goes for your other claims: claims to bodily integrity, privacy, against paternalism and so on. One important feature of this

[12] I address some other cases in (A. Lovett, 2024a, pp. 22–35; 2024b).

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view is that it doesn't rely on any threshold of rational capacities such that below the threshold one has no claims, and above very weighty claims. It is committed to a threshold of a sort – something with no rational capacities (a rock, a table) has no claims. But things with minimal rational capacities only have very weak claims. The normative significance of rational capacities is scalar. Still, all cognitively normal adults are pretty high up the scale. So all such adults have weighty claims against subordination, regardless of how much money they have.

Let's turn to a different class of cases. Think about teacher-student and doctor-patient relationships. These are both relationships of asymmetric power. Teachers tell their students what to do; they give them assignments and direction in classes. Doctors give their patients courses of treatment. Students usually don't have comparable power over their teachers and patients usually don't have comparable power over their doctors. Yet, still, both kinds of relationships are often anodyne. Teacher-student and doctor-patient relationships are not deeply objectionable. Why is that? I believe it is because, in these cases, the claim against being subjected to an asymmetry of power has been waived. After all, almost all claims can be waived. Consider the claim to bodily integrity. You have a claim against being punched in the face. But if you step into the boxing ring with someone you waive that claim. When your opponent punches you, they do not wrong you. You've consented to be punched. Likewise, claims against being subjected to a power asymmetry can be waived. Students waive their claim when they enter the classroom, and patients waive their claim when they go to see a doctor. So these power asymmetries do not wrong anybody.

Let me clarify two points here. First, there are constraints on when waiving a claim is valid. The claim has to be waived voluntarily. It cannot be validly waived as a result of coercion, manipulation, or deception. It cannot be validly waived if I have no decent alternative options. Yet for most (adult) students and patients, these conditions are not violated: these people validly waive their claims. Second, waiving a claim is distinct from alienating it. When you waive a claim, you keep the ability to retract the waiver; you can step out of the boxing ring and so reassume your right not to be punched. The same is true with claims against subordination. These cannot be alienated in the sense of given up permanently. They can just be waived – this is why you cannot validly sell yourself into slavery. So patients and students don't alienate their claims to be subject to your asymmetric power, they just temporarily waive it.

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The key point is that the fact that claims against subordination can be waived doesn't show that the relationship between rich and poor is anodyne. Most of us never waived our claim against being subjected to the asymmetric power of the rich. The rich have power over us because they have an enormous amount of material resources, and we can use those resources to achieve our ends. You were never asked whether Jeff Bezos could have a one-hundred-and-fifty-billion-dollar fortune. People haven't consented to the vast material inequalities that structure our societies. We are born into a society with such inequalities and, individually, have little influence on them. Now, if you join Bezos' employ as his personal assistant, and you had decent alternative options, perhaps you validly consent to his power over you *qua* employer. But most of us have done no such thing and so have not consented to his having any asymmetric power over us. So we still have a valid claim against being subordinated to him. It still wrongs us to be subjected to his asymmetric power.

4.2. Deceptive Cases

Another class of cases are, I think, merely apparent counterexamples to the position that power asymmetries are objectionable. One case here is that of the relationship between representative and citizen in a representative democracy. Representatives have asymmetric power over ordinary citizens. Representatives are the ones who make the laws and determine what the government does. Yet – one might think – the relationship between citizen and representative needn't be objectionable.[13] So not all power asymmetries are objectionable. Daniel Viehoff suggests that this is because power asymmetries are objectionable only when they're not justified in the right way (Viehoff, 2019, pp. 17–25). An asymmetry of power is justified in the right way when it is justified by reference to the rights and well-being of those with less power. We can understand a justification as the thing people think explains why the asymmetry is in place. If this view is correct, it would undermine The Power View. Specifically, if wealth inequalities are justified by their benefits to everyone, they will be anodyne.

[13] For this view, see (Viehoff, 2019, pp. 20–25; Motchoulski, 2021, p. 642; Zuehl, 2024, pp. 587–91).

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We should resist this account of when power asymmetries are objectionable. To see why, consider the case of benevolent, competent dictatorships. We might justify installing a benevolent, competent dictator in office on the basis of the fact that they would make better policies than we would ruling ourselves democratically. That justification might be correct and widely acknowledged. We might all be better off under the dictator's rule than under democratic rule. The dictator might even better protect our rights than would a democracy. Nonetheless, setting up such a dictatorship would still involve setting up objectionably inegalitarian relationships. You are subordinated by a dictator, even when they're installed in office because their rule is good for you. So asymmetries of power, even when they're good for everyone and justified on that basis, can be subordinating.

What then should we think about the relationship between representatives and ordinary citizens? We should think that it is, *prima facie*, objectionable. However, when democracy works well, the objection is mitigated. That is because the cost of exercising your influence over someone affects how much subordinating power you have over them. If I can only exercise power over you at great personal cost to myself, then that reduces how much power I have over you. In well-functioning democracies, representatives who exercise their power over ordinary citizens in harmful ways get voted out of office. So the relationship between representative and ordinary citizen needn't be too objectionable. Representatives have far less power over ordinary citizens than it might seem, due to the sanctioning power of elections.[14] Thus, the citizen-representative relationship is not a good counterexample to the thesis that power asymmetries are objectionable.[15]

Let us turn to another class of cases. Consider persuasive power. Suppose you have power over someone simply because you are extremely good at rational argument. You are able to get people to do what you want because you are good at identifying their reasons and pointing them out to people. By so moving people through

[14] This is essentially my story in Lovett (2021).

[15] Consider, also, a case in which you have a physically stronger neighbour who can push you around. Kolodny (2023, p. 94) and Zuehl (2024, p. 575) both think that you needn't be subordinated to this neighbour. The point about costs addresses this case. In well-policed societies it is very costly for your neighbour to physically push you around. They'll get arrested. So, in such societies, their physical strength doesn't give them much power over you.

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their rational faculties, you can exert asymmetric power over them. Or consider the type of persuasive power one might get by being very beautiful or charismatic. Beauty and charm might give you the ability to influence what people do. One might doubt that any such persuasive power is objectionable. Specifically one might doubt that asymmetries of persuasive power are ever subordinating.[16] And so one might doubt that asymmetries of power are always subordinating. Additionally, perhaps whatever explains why persuasive power isn't subordinating will also imply that the power of the wealthy isn't subordinating.

These are the most concerning putative counterexamples to my main thesis. Still, it is very difficult to see what the important difference is between persuasive power and other kinds of power. Could it be that persuasive power works through people's rational capacities? No. For a start, power based on beauty and charisma doesn't work through rational capacities. But, more importantly, power can be subordinating despite working through people's rational capacities. Suppose I point a gun at you and start making demands. My power works through your rational capacities. But it still subordinates you. Could it be that persuasive power is never contrary to the interests of the persuaded? No. One can persuade people to do things that aren't in their interests. And power can be subordinating despite promoting one's interest. The case of benevolent, competent, dictators shows this. Perhaps it is that persuasive power never involves violence? Also no. When I have power over you because I am withholding a cure to your lethal illness, I subordinate you. But I don't threaten you with violence. Power can be subordinating even when wholly detached from physical force. So it is not at all obvious what explains why persuasive power isn't subordinating.

In light of that, I am inclined to think asymmetries of persuasive power are subordinating.[17] Some cases provide evidence for this. Imagine, for example, that you meet a master rhetorician. They are sufficiently eloquent, smart, and charismatic that can persuade you to do whatever they want. You are like putty in the hands of this master rhetorician. Your relationship to this rhetorician seems to me unsettling. Intuitively speaking, it is an inegalitarian relationships. You have reason to free yourself from their influence. So the

[16] For this kind of view, see Lukes (2005, pp. 35–37) and Kolodny (2014, pp. 332–336).

[17] For different treatments of persuasive power, see Lukes (2005, pp. 35–37) and Kolodny (2014, pp. 332–336).

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ability to persuade people can generates a problematic power asymmetry. Why, then, does persuasive power often seem anodyne? We can explain that via two points. First, persuasion usually does not yield very substantial asymmetries of power. In part, that is because persuasion is usually a relatively limited sort of power. We're very good at avoiding being persuaded when we don't want to be. In part, this is because the ability to rationally persuade someone to do something is usually largely symmetrical. If you can persuade someone on certain issues, they will often be able to persuade you on other issues. So persuasive power asymmetries are typically small. This is why they are rarely very objectionable. Still, I believe that asymmetries of persuasive power are objectionable.

I've argued that asymmetries of power between adults are objectionable in all cases in which the claim against subordination isn't waived. That is a very large proportion of cases. Most importantly, it includes the asymmetry of power between rich and poor. If power asymmetries are typically subordinating, then the power the wealthy wield over the rest of us is also very likely subordinating. Let me make one final comment on this point. Previously, I said that this problem requires an especially stringent policy response. We can now see that this is due to the generality of our objection to power asymmetries. This generality means that all, or practically all, inequalities of wealth are objectionable. When Jeff Bezos has more money than you, that gives him objectionable power over you. But, equally, when you have more than other people, that gives you power over them. You can pay them to do things. Since practically every power asymmetry is objectionable, that too is objectionable. So the appropriate public policy response to wealth inequalities is not simply to provide enough for the worse off, or to ensure that their well-being is maximized. To wholly address the problem with wealth inequalities, one has to wholly eradicate the inequalities.

5. Are Power Asymmetries Ever Objectionable?

The intuitive motivation for the claim that power asymmetries are objectionable comes from thinking about paradigmatically inegalitarian relationships. This claim nicely explains why the relationship of master to slave, king to subject, or lord to peasant is objectionable. This explanation supports the strand of relational egalitarianism rooted in democratic theory. But in Section 2 I suggested that there was another strand of relational egalitarianism. This strand focuses not on inequalities of power, but rather on attitudinal disparities.

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One might think that this allows us to undercut the initial motivation for the Power View. These paradigmatically inegalitarian relationships are also shot through with attitudinal disparities. People tend to have contempt for slaves and elevated esteem for kings. Maybe these disparities wholly explain the objection to these relationships – inequalities of power have nothing to do with it.[18] In this section, I'll consider this final strategy for resisting The Power View.

The response to this strategy is simply that inegalitarian relationships can rest on brute force alone, without any disparity of regard. Imagine, for example, that a kidnapper takes some people to his basement with the aim of extracting a ransom. The victims do what the kidnapper says, because the kidnapper threatens to shoot them if they don't. But the victims are disgusted by the kidnapper's behaviour, and they make their disgust very clear. They insult the kidnapper. They show him disesteem and disrespect. They show him much less regard than people are usually shown in their society. In this case, the kidnapper does not receive more regard than other people – or even than his victims. Yet, still, there is an inegalitarian relationship between kidnapper and victim. This relationship obtains simply because the kidnapper has enormous power over his victims. The general point is that one can subordinate people simply through brute force, without extracting any esteem or respect from them. So we cannot understand inegalitarian relationships solely in terms of attitudinal disparities. That isn't to say that attitudinal disparities aren't part of the grounds for some inegalitarian relationships. But it is to say that power asymmetries are an ineluctable component of relationships of subordination and domination.

More strongly, though, I believe it is difficult to understand any inegalitarian relationships in terms of attitudinal disparities. I've so far suggested that the relevant attitudes include disparities of esteem and admiration and (recognition) respect and so on. But this is implausible. Consider Roger Federer. Federer is much more esteemed than I am, because of his tennis-playing skill. But there is nothing wrong with this. I have no objection to Federer's enjoyment of esteem. So there isn't any general problem with some people receiving more admiration or recognition respect than others. There might be a problem with some people thinking others are moral inferiors. But paradigmatically inegalitarian relationships need not involve such thoughts. Deep racial hierarchies might be grounded not in any explicit attitudes of moral superiority and inferiority, but

[18] For this view, see Motchoulski (2021) and Cox (2022).

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rather the belief that some races are more intelligent than others. Sexists might not think women's interests are less important than those of men – they might just think women are much worse at rational deliberation. So it is not obvious what attitudes we could really take to constitute inegalitarian relationships.

Niko Kolodny (2023, p. 104) addresses this issue by saying it is really only disparities in *unmerited* attitudes that are subordinating. The thought is that our esteem for Federer is merited, and so not subordinating. But there are also cases of unmerited disparities of esteem that are not subordinating. Imagine Helen and John are two equally talented art students. But Helen catches a lucky break in art school. Her work catches the eye of a gallery owner, who exhibits it. The gallery owner tells everyone that it is excellent, correctly pointing to its virtues. News spreads and, over time, Helen becomes an internationally renowned, much feted, artist. John, in contrast, never catches any lucky breaks. He produces work that is just as good as Helen's, but he never wins anything like her renown. Here the disparity in esteem between John and Helen is unmerited. Still, I don't think there is anything objectionable about the relationship between the two. The world is full of such cases – where someone wins esteem and admiration through a little bit of merit and a lot of luck. These surely don't all instantiate relationships of subordination. So I doubt that even unmerited disparities of the relevant attitudes are subordinating.

The upshot of this is that I am sceptical of the first strand of relational egalitarian thought. Rather than thinking of inegalitarian relationships wholly in terms of attitudinal disparities, I am inclined to think of them wholly in terms of inequalities of power. It is easy to see how one might do this. Being admired and esteemed and respected is an enormous source of power. It gives one the ability to affect what other people do. Being held in contempt and disregard reduces one's ability to affect other people. Attitudinal disparities matter simply because they are a cause of power inequalities. This, if true, allows us to return to the idea, mentioned in Section 2, that wealth inequalities are bad because they lead to attitudinal disparities. It is not only that wealth inequalities needn't generate disparities of esteem and respect. More importantly, such disparities are only objectionable insofar as they lead to asymmetries of power. Yet the route from wealth inequalities to power asymmetries needn't detour through attitudinal disparities. When some people have a lot more money than others, they can simply pay

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them to do what they want. So the Power View is the better relational egalitarian explanation of what's wrong with inequalities of wealth.

Let me address two final points about the Power View. One question is about how responsibility connects to the view. Many people have thought that responsibility is enormously important for distributive justice. If we're responsible for our having less than other people – because we made foolish choices or put in little effort – then we have no objection to our relative poverty. On this view, it's only when inequalities between people arise which aren't a product of their choices that such inequalities are objectionable.[19] The Power View is incompatible with such a focus on responsibility. It is bad to be subjected to asymmetric power even if you are so subjected due to your own foolishness or laziness. If you could have overthrown a dictator early on, but were too lazy or foolish to do so, you are still objectionably subordinated when he is entrenched in power. Power asymmetries are not made anodyne by the fact that those with less power are responsible for them. So attributions of responsibility have limited significance on The Power View.

A second point about the Power View concerns levelling down. The Power View implies that there is reason to reduce the wealth of the very wealthy, even when that doesn't give anyone else any more resources. One might deny we ever have reason to level down in this manner. To respond to this worry, we need to distinguish between levelling down well-being and levelling down wealth. The levelling down objection to egalitarian views was originally aimed at views that hold that one should sometimes reduce the well-being of the best-off even if this doesn't benefit the worse off in any way.[20] I think it is a good objection to such views. The problem is that such levelling down doesn't seem good for anyone. But the Power View doesn't imply that one should level down in this sense. It says one should sometimes reduce the wealth of the wealthiest, even if one cannot distribute it to the less wealthy. This reduces the power the wealthy have over everyone else. But that is good for some people – it means that the less wealthy suffer less subordination. The Power View is committed only to a justifiable kind of levelling down.

[19] For the most influential advocates of this view, see Dworkin (1981) and Cohen (1989).

[20] This is the role the objection plays in Parfit (1997).

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6. Conclusion

Let me sum up. I've identified a distinctive problem with inequalities of wealth: they constitute asymmetries of power and thereby constitute inegalitarian relationships. They do this simply because the rich can pay the rest of us to do what they want. This problem is distinctive in that it's especially robust and requires an especially stringent policy response. The problem is there whenever there are wealth inequalities. It can only be solved by complete equality of wealth. Concretely, that supports deeply redistributive public policy. It supports the case for confiscatory wealth taxes and big transfers to everyone else. I believe it also supports the case for a very generous welfare state, and indeed international wealth redistribution. In other words, since money is power, we should adopt a radical policy response to material inequalities.

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