

Superstar Economics



Stephen Metcalf [challenges](#) Robert Nozick's "breathtaking defense of libertarianism" in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Metcalf also tackles Nozick's Wilt Chamberlain example, which pits personal worth against the interference of taxes:

Nozick vanishes most of the known features of capitalism (capital, owners, means of production, labor, collective bargaining) while maximizing one feature of capitalism—its ability to funnel money to the uniquely talented. In the example, "liberty" is all but cognate with a system that efficiently compensates the superstar.

E.D. Kain [has](#) a roundup of the web's biggest criticisms of Metcalf's piece. Conor Friedersdorf [runs through](#) examples of libertarians fighting for things other than their own self-interest. David Boaz [says](#) that Nozick didn't disavow libertarianism later in life, as Metcalf claims. Yglesias [counters](#) that, while still Libertarian, Nozick "no longer embraced the doctrine espoused in his famous work of political philosophy" at the time of his death. Julian Sanchez (who [interviewed](#) Nozick years ago) [grasps](#) the larger issue at hand with the Chamberlain example:

Metcalf seems to imagine that this four-page argument—which occurs about a third of the way through a long, dense, and in places somewhat technical book—is *in itself* supposed to establish the injustice of taxation and redistribution, or the justice of real-world holdings arising from existing markets. Would that political philosophy were so easy! It's not supposed to do that at all, of course: It is meant to develop an abstract point about the inadequacy of a certain (purely patterned) way of conceiving the criteria for evaluating the justice of property holdings.

Chait [defends](#) Metcalf:

Metcalf's point was that Nozick was seizing upon an unusual and deeply atypical example of wealth, and used it to draw up rules to presumptively apply to all wealth. It's like using the example of a man stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving children as the basis for our laws about property and theft. To object to such an exercise is not to deny that morally justifiable theft *can* exist. It's just a bad model to build an absolute moral defense of capitalism.

Mark Thompson [thinks](#) Chait is misreading Nozick:

The Chamberlain argument ... exists for the limited purpose of demonstrating that inequality is not inherently unjust, or, even if it is, it cannot be rectified in a permanent manner without interfering with people's lives in a manner that few would find acceptable. Saying that inequality is not inherently unjust is a far, far cry from saying that it is inherently just, or even that it is more often than not just.

(Image by Molle William, from the "[Make Your Franklin](#)" project.)