

Exploitation, Workers and Taxes: Why Billionaires aren't Justified

People often underestimate how much a billion is. Just to put it into context, [one billion seconds is 32 years](#); it's a huge number. For a person on the average UK income, it'd take them over 33,000 years to be a billionaire. But even more amazingly, during a pandemic where millions of people have lost jobs and livelihoods, [American billionaires have gotten \\$565 billion richer](#). Jeff Bezos, the richest man in the world, [got \\$48 billion richer between just March and June this year](#). But this doesn't make being a billionaire unethical on its own. It's more complicated than that.

Simply saying that billionaires are immoral would be too simplistic. If you did, you'd be putting an arbitrary limit on wealth. So where would it stop? What amount of wealth would be moral then? Saying billionaires are unethical on a surface level isn't enough; we need to dig a little deeper to explain why.

People often say that nothing is certain except death and taxes. This isn't the case for billionaires though: they escape the taxes part. Amazon, owned by Jeff Bezos, [paid just £6.3 million in corporation tax in the UK last year, despite its sales being over £13 billion](#). You might ask: is Bezos to blame for Amazon's practices? Well, Bezos gains [nearly all of his income from his Amazon shares](#), and as its CEO, he's ultimately responsible for its exploitative practices. Billionaires and their multi-billion-pound companies are well-versed in tax avoidance and exploiting tax loopholes. This is part of what makes them unethical; they just aren't contributing their fair share.

And then there's the issue of workers' rights. We often hear stories about how big companies treat their workers horribly. For example, Chinese workers who manufacture the iPhone are sometimes made to [work 100 hours a week for very small wages](#). This exploitation feeds into billionaires' pockets and it's unjustifiable. This kind of exploitation isn't legal, but they're able to hide it. So after committing these abuses, trying to cleanse their images by donating to charity is hypocritical. To take the example of Bezos again, [he donated \\$2 billion to charities in 2018](#). You might think that's a lot: not for him. \$2 billion was just [1.3% of his wealth at the time](#). But that's beside the point. Donating to charity after abusing their workers doesn't excuse them. In my opinion, they prefer charity to workers' rights because it's flashier and improves their image; once you see through that, it's clearly unethical.

Now, billionaires often claim that they should be allowed to earn as much as they do because they [provide people with jobs and incomes](#). Putting the issues of taxes and workers' rights aside for a moment, this argument still falls apart. I mentioned earlier that it would take 33,000 years for a person on an average UK income to become a billionaire. Does this mean billionaires work 33,000 times harder than the rest of us? Of course not. So when billionaires say that they deserve the amount of wealth that they have, it's quite difficult to believe. And as for the fact that they provide jobs, we've already seen the way that some of them treat their workers.

I've just taken two arguments against billionaires here: taxes and workers' rights. There are others. Some people are uneasy about their [donations to political parties](#) and the power they have in our democratic system. Some think that being a billionaire is just wrong because they're hoarding wealth. You may see some truth in this.

But I'd suggest a slightly different answer. It's not simply being a billionaire that makes someone unethical: it's how they got their money. If they got it by infringing on workers' rights and tax avoidance, then it is immoral behavior. Unfortunately, the reality is that becoming a billionaire necessitates exploitation to gain that much wealth, so in this sense, they are unethical. The fact is, it's impossible to become a billionaire without tax avoidance, and many of them also exploit their workers (the only way to be a 'moral billionaire' would be to inherit it). This might seem a bit extreme, but it's the inevitable truth. It's not just Jeff Bezos and the multi-billionaire shareholders of Apple who have benefitted from exploitation. Take [Bernard Arnault](#), [Richard Branson](#), and [Carlos Slim](#): all have made use of tax avoidance. You won't be able to find a billionaire who hasn't engaged in tax avoidance (many have been accused of tax evasion too), workers' rights infringements, or other unethical activities.

If you tell a billionaire that they're hoarding wealth, or that they have too much money, they'll just point to their charity work and the jobs they've created. Instead, ask the question: how did you get your money? They'll be a bit more uneasy about that.

Sharvan Gopal, 20th December 2020