

Ethics Bowl Feature: Billionaires in Space

By Rebecca Grant Prentice and Natalie Uribe

In this invited feature, Rebecca Grant Prentice and Natalie Uribe, two members of the 2021-2022 Cal Poly Pomona (CPP) Ethics Bowl team, provide some background on Ethics Bowl at CPP and in general. They also outline a sample case and model putting forward a position on that case to demonstrate Ethics Bowl in action. To capture the spirit of Ethics Bowl, they conclude with some commentary on formulating and putting forward their position.

I. Introduction

This past fall, the Cal Poly Pomona (CPP) Ethics Bowl team, under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Brian Kim, finished in the top 5 of the California Regional Ethics Bowl Competition and, as a result, qualified for the Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl, where teams from colleges across the United States come together to discuss and explore issues of contemporary moral concern. The competition runs for a full academic year with teams preparing for regionals in the Fall semester and competing in December and qualifying teams preparing for nationals in the Spring semester and competing in late February or early March. Unlike debate competitions, teams are not pitted against each other. Instead, teams are given the creative freedom to present and defend any view or position they choose. The spirit and aim of Ethics Bowl are collaborative inquiry. Prior to both the regional and

national competitions, short summaries of a wide variety of topics are distributed to the teams. These cases introduce issues of contemporary interest that raise complex moral questions.

CPP sent their first teams to compete in the Ethics Bowl in 2005 and has successfully fielded teams since. Over the first fifteen years of competing (2005-2019), CPP won the California regional, finished as a runner-up, and qualified four times for the national Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl, with a semifinals finish one year and a quarterfinals finish another. CPP is currently riding a three-year streak (since 2019) of qualifying teams for the national competition.

For this invited feature, we would like to share what it is like to be part of the Ethics Bowl. To do so, we have selected a case that was used during one round of this year's Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl, summarize the case, and then, share the views and arguments we presented during the round. Finally, in hopes of embodying the spirit of ethics bowl and continuing the inquiry with the reader, we conclude with some questions and comments we have about our own presentation.

II. A Sample Case: Billionaires in Space

The case titled *Billionaires in Space* explores the recent space race, in which billionaires Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Richard Branson have cumulatively spent 400 billion dollars on their personal space exploration projects. Their immense resources to pursue these pet projects are paired with the fact that these billionaires and their associated companies are taxed at a rate that is much lower than the average United States citizen. According to Jesse Eisinger, Jeff Ernsthause, and Paul Kiel, “Many Americans live paycheck to paycheck, amassing little wealth and paying the federal government a percentage of their income that rises if they earn more. In recent years, the median American household earned about \$70,000 annually and paid 14% in federal taxes. The highest income tax rate, 37%, kicked in this year, for couples, on earnings above \$628,300. The confidential tax records obtained by ProPublica show that the ultrarich effectively sidesteps this system.”¹

¹ Jesse Eisinger, Jeff Ernsthause, and Paul Kiel, “The Secret IRS Files: Trove of Never-Before-Seen Records Reveal How the Wealthiest Avoid

Each of these billionaires has different aims for their projects. Jeff Bezos founded Blue Origin, an aerospace manufacturer and space flight company, and has primarily focused on space tourism. Most notably, The New Shepard, Blue Origin's suborbital launch vehicle, surpassed the Kármán Line, which is known as the altitude at which outer space begins, to an altitude of 66.52 miles. The aims of Blue Origin are similar to those of Branson's Virgin Atlantic, which is focused on expanding space tourism. On the other hand, Space X's focus is to make human life multi-planetary; Musk told a SXSW audience in 2013, "I've said I want to die on Mars, just not on impact."² Space X's aim is to colonize Mars.

One issue raised by this case is whether these billionaires are simply trying to escape earth, and we might also wonder whether the immense amount of resources used for space exploration could be better used to address current crises, such as climate change, world hunger, and poverty. The case concluded with a tweet by Adam Schiff from July 20, 2021: "Listen, I'm all for space exploration and it must have been an amazing view. But maybe—and I'm just spitballing here—if Amazon and other companies paid their fair share in taxes, we could lift all kids—if not into space—at least out of poverty. Sincerely, Earthlings."³

During the competition, the presenting team is asked to respond to a question that they have not seen previously. In this case, we were asked, "Is spending money on space exploration morally justifiable? Why or why not?"

Income Tax," *ProPublica*, June 8, 2021,

<https://www.propublica.org/article/the-secret-irs-files-trove-of-never-before-seen-records-reveal-how-the-wealthiest-avoid-income-tax>.

² Elien Blue Becque, "Elon Musk Wants to Die on Mars," *Vanity Fair*, March 10, 2013, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/tech/2013/03/elon-musk-die-mars>.

³ Adam Schiff (@RepAdamSchiff), "Listen, I'm all for space exploration and it must have been an amazing view. But maybe—and I'm just spitballing here," Twitter, July 20, 2021, <https://twitter.com/repadamschiff/status/1417639459647115266?lang=en>

III. Our Presentation

Our position is that, while it is morally justifiable to invest in space exploration, there is something morally problematic about the way that current space exploration projects are being led by billionaires with no recourse to public interests in determining the value of the projects. In laying out our position, we begin by discussing an intuitive principle that can be used to justify the view that billionaires are entitled to use their wealth to fund their own projects. We will argue that, to make the principle valid, there are a number of caveats that must be made. More importantly, the principle relies upon some ambiguities in the concept of ownership that must be made precise. We will first focus on some of the caveats and conditions governing how we use what we own. We will then examine the concept of ownership required to make the principle valid. In short, we will argue that, because these billionaires amassed their wealth through the implicit coercion of workers and the exploitation of their labor, they fail to own their wealth in a way that would entitle them to full autonomy. In turn, they must, along with other demands, take into account the collective interests and concerns of the public. Given this, we conclude that, while spending money on space exploration is morally justifiable, the current billionaire-funded space race is not.

The intuitive claim underpinning the moral permissibility of these personal space exploration projects is the principle that if you own something, then you are entitled to full autonomy in how you use what you own. Billionaires own huge amounts of wealth, and given that ownership, they generally have the legal right to use, possess, and give away their wealth in ways they see fit. Of course, as it stands, this principle is obviously false. The same moral principles that govern our actions also govern how we use what we own. So, our principle must incorporate the moral caveat that you are entitled to autonomy to use what you own given that you act in morally permissible ways.

Thus, we should first address whether space exploration is a morally justifiable project to invest in and pursue. We think it is worth first thinking about the relationship between humans and space exploration. Space exploration has long stimulated the minds of human imagination. Humans have an intangible desire for space exploration, as space exploration enables us to explore the boundaries of our own existence and the limits of our potential. In the pursuit of

this intangible desire, our efforts have produced tangible benefits. We have recognized the benefits of space exploration, even at the initial point of developing or considering space exploration, directly benefiting other technological advancements. According to the International Space Exploration Coordination Group:

Scientific research founded on data from space is also leading to discoveries with benefits for life on Earth. Ongoing research in the space environment of the ISS – in areas such as human physiology, plant biology, materials science, and fundamental physics – continues to yield insights that benefit society. For example, studies of the human body’s response to extended periods in the microgravity environment of the ISS are improving our understanding of the aging process.⁴

Given that we have both this innate and humanistic relationship with space, it’s clear that space exploration has produced tangible benefits for us here on earth. While our discussion will not be focused on the costs and benefits of space exploration, we can also note that, on the whole, a very small percentage of our resources is being used for space exploration. While we acknowledge that there are many more pressing issues that we face as a human race, we think that relatively small investments in the future and in potential knowledge gained are, on the whole, worthwhile and believe that modest investments in space exploration are morally permissible.

Returning to our principle, we note that it relies upon a view of ownership and use that is grounded in a legal and intuitive understanding of ownership. While this may not seem problematic at first glance, it becomes much more problematic when we investigate the ideas of ownership and use in our current context. When we think about the ownership of an object, we usually conceive of some object that we could hold or touch, something tangible that has an intimate relationship with us. The most immediate sense of ownership is our ownership of personal items of everyday use, like a toothbrush or a coffee cup. This kind of ownership could be thought of as personal

⁴ *Benefits Stemming from Space Exploration*, International Space Exploration Coordinating Group, Executive Summary, September 2013, 8, <https://www.nasa.gov/sites/default/files/files/Benefits-Stemming-from-Space-Exploration-2013-TAGGED.pdf>.

ownership, which is ownership based on a personal relationship with the items in question. Our toothbrush, a prime example of personal property, can certainly be used however we like.

Or can it? Obviously, as we noted above, there are limits to how we could ethically use a toothbrush, even if it's not a matter of legality. It is not technically illegal to use our toothbrush to clean another person's toothbrush, but considering taboos around hygiene, personal boundaries, and respect for other people, even if our toothbrush was cleaned first, this use could and likely would be considered an ethical transgression. So, I could use a toothbrush in either an ethical way or an unethical way, regardless of whether or not it is legally permissible. Thus, legal ownership of an object is not a sufficient ethical justification for full autonomy over how that object is used; rather, the use of an object is always caught in a web of ethical obligations that are particular to both the object in question and the social environment in which it is used.

At this point, it may seem as though—considering that the only apparent ethical obligations that need to be taken into account regarding how billionaires use massive amounts of wealth are whether or not they are using that wealth for projects that don't seem to cause any ethical concerns—space exploration is an acceptable project for them to spend money on. As long as their projects themselves are not unethical, then there are no problems or further obligations. However, when we consider the object in question, there is a qualitative shift in the nature of the relationship between the ownership of wealth acquired through collective labor vs personal ownership of a toothbrush. The key difference in this relationship is that, while I may buy or be gifted a toothbrush, wealth is generally produced by labor. Where collective labor is the means of a sum of wealth, people enter a series of relationships that generate new obligations, and the ethical obligations of the relationships can vary in their complexity and ethical implications.

The owner of a business comes to acquire their wealth from the labor of their employees, unless, of course, they are self-employed. A craftsman or an artist who owns their own labor and profits from selling the products of their own labor is in a direct relationship to the wealth their labor has generated. Their primary obligations regarding the use of that wealth depend solely on their relationship to their own

needs and desires. But the vast majority of businesses are not cases of self-employment. Most businesses employ at least a handful of workers, and these workers' relationship to the wealth they help produce is mediated through their employer. After accounting for wages and other necessary costs that are required for the maintenance of the businesses, business owners are then left with the profits, and with these profits, they have the freedom to spend or invest as they see fit. The workers, however, have agreed to being divorced from having any kind of relationship with the profits they helped make as part of the terms of their employment.

This doesn't seem too problematic at the small scale, such as in the case of a small locally owned pizzeria, where the owner may only make enough for themselves, to pay their employees, and stay in business. But such an arrangement still has a lot of potential to become problematic. Suppose the pizzeria suddenly experienced a massive increase in customers due to development in the area. The owner of the business sees this as a great opportunity to increase profits, and despite the increasing workload, they refuse to hire more employees. Instead, they encourage their workers to do more, and intensify the working conditions. After a while, the profits do go up, and the employer begins to think about how maybe they can buy a new car by the end of the year. Meanwhile, the wages of the workers remain the same, since there is no explicit obligation to compensate the workers for increased productivity.

As this process scales up, it becomes increasingly fraught with issues, as the amount of profit increases exponentially while wages of thousands of workers remain low. In a capitalist society, where the vast majority of people must face either absolute poverty or sell their labor to those who own the means of production because they cannot produce their own means of subsistence without access to the means of production, the choice to sell their labor or not is a false choice. Because of this, the voluntary relationship between most workers and their employers is implicitly coercive. The wealth produced by these workers' labor is collected, and in the process, it is alienated from those that contributed to making that wealth, with only a portion of it being returned to the workers in the form of wages or salary and the use of the profits remain a private concern of their employers. In the case of large corporations, the amount of wealth produced by these

workers' labor is vast, and when wages remain low, huge profits are reaped by these corporations. This unequal distribution of the wealth produced by workers and the alienation of workers from that wealth is entirely legal, but we do not think it is ethically sound. The economic inequality produced by this process is unethical, given the ever-increasing accumulation of profit, more and more concentrated in the hands of a few, while many struggle to live off their wages. We view this as exploitation, since workers are given an unequal share and few benefits from the vast wealth that is collected from their labor, while that same labor overwhelmingly provides benefits to large-scale business owners. These conditions of implicit structural coercion and the exploitation of workers are a part of the very conditions that enable the existence of billionaires.

Once again, there seems to be a qualitative shift in the kind of obligations entailed by ownership that corresponds to a qualitative shift in the kind of object, since the relationship between me and my toothbrush is much simpler ethically speaking than the relationship between the owner of a massive corporation and the wealth their company has produced. Even small-business owners are obligated to use the wealth they collect from the productive process to reimburse their workers for their labor, as well as obligations to pay unique taxes, meaning that the obligations to use attached to the ownership of the wealth produced by labor are already quite different than the obligations to use attached to my toothbrush. And so, we think that further obligations are necessary to consider when we talk about how the vast amount of wealth owned by billionaires is used and what it is used for, since the process of its production is ethically problematic.

Because the wealth that billionaires own is acquired through social coercion and the exploitation of the labor of workers, and we consider coercion and exploitation to be unethical practices, we believe that the ethical use of this wealth beyond the maintenance of the corporation and the payment of the workers should involve a reparation for this process of coercion and exploitation in the form of an investment in the collective interests of the workers. We believe that this obligation is grounded in the obligation to seek redress for the ethically problematic way that the wealth was produced. If the wealth is massive enough, it should be used to benefit workers more broadly in the form of serving public interests in general. We also believe that for the use

of this wealth to be ethical, it should not only appeal to the collective interests of the public but also benefit them in some tangible way. This criterion of tangible social benefit is exponentially more essential as we talk about larger sums of wealth because of the increase in possible benefits that larger sums of wealth entail for society as a whole. As an example, if somehow people collectively were invested in some large portion of the wealth produced by Amazon to be used to build a 100-foot-tall platinum-plated statue of Jeff Bezos, it would not satisfy our full criteria of the ethical use of the wealth. We assert that only under these conditions, of serving collective interests and producing tangible public benefits, is using the vast amounts of wealth that billionaires possess to fund large-scale projects ethically permissible.

Currently, billionaire-funded space programs do not satisfy our criteria. It's entirely unclear if collective interests were addressed in the decision to begin these projects, since this is simply not a part of the fabric of how these businesses are run within the contemporary capitalist socio-economic paradigm, and it is of no advantage to billionaires to pursue such projects in these terms. Therefore, the first criterion cannot be verified to have been met, which in our view invalidates the moral permissibility of these space programs outright. Even if these projects could be argued to have tangible benefits for society as a whole, they do not account for the problem of addressing the harms that exploitation and alienation of those who helped enable. Not only this, but the even more problematic assertion that billionaires could be capable of autocratically determining projects on behalf of benefiting society as a whole with no recourse to collective interests emerges as a consequence of admitting that only the second criterion is necessary for the moral permissibility of the use of their wealth for such large-scale projects. Considering that it is already difficult for public officials to discern what is in the best interests of the public, we don't think it is reasonable to assume that billionaires will have any exceptional capacity to know what is best for society without any involvement from the rest of society.

IV. Commentary

In the spirit of Ethics Bowl, we conclude our discussion by reflecting on our own presentation and raising some questions and comments about the proffered argument and view. This, in fact,

follows how a typical Ethics Bowl round would proceed with one team providing commentary on the other team's presentation. As a recap, we argued that billionaires have certain ethical obligations to use their wealth in a particular way because of how they acquired their wealth. A worry that follows from this is that we haven't identified all the criteria that must be met for these personal projects to be morally justified. After all, if Jeff Bezos used some of his wealth to offer some form of benefit back to the public, as a gesture of restitution, this is a merely palliative act that does not actually address the issue of coercion and exploitation. If we consider the conditions of coercion and exploitation that enable the existence of billionaires to be genuine harms, and if the implication of the first two criteria is that a billionaire's use of the wealth they have acquired must somehow address these harms for the use of that wealth to be considered ethically permissible, then it doesn't appear as though there is a genuine way for billionaires to use that wealth in a completely ethical way without undermining the conditions that enable them to be in the position they are in.

Billionaires continuing to benefit from these harms so long as they are accompanied by beneficent acts, done on behalf of those harmed and performed by those who help perpetuate it, appears as though it might be an ethically incoherent position. Given that billionaires aren't necessarily personally responsible for the coercive and exploitative condition in which workers find themselves, at what point is a broader systemic critique of these conditions necessary to address the root of these problems?

In offering some commentary on our view of the permissibility of investing in projects for space exploration, it seems as though we are saying that collective human desire and the possibility of beneficial technological development are sufficient reasons to allow for the ethical permissibility of space exploration. Putting the issue of them being funded by billionaires aside, with many other more pressing social and environmental concerns confronting the world today it seems like questions of priority may be important. Is it possible that we may have an ethical duty to prioritize some projects over others, even if they are all ethically permissible in the most general sense?

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