

Consider this claim:

(D) People get what they deserve in the free market.

This sort of claim is often made by libertarians and conservatives as an objection to redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. It would be wrong, according to them, since it would be taking stuff from people who deserve it and giving it to those who don't.

I think this claim is highly dubious however, and I'm gonna present three arguments against it. These arguments aren't conclusive, since they have empirical premises that require support, but they seem pretty plausible to me.

First, I need to make an assumption about the concept of desert. I assume that, if people deserve anything at all, they only deserve benefits for things that are within their control (hard work, choices, etc.) and not for things that are outside of their control (position of birth, luck, etc.).

If you reject this assumption, then perhaps you're using an entirely different concept of desert.

Argument from Luck

(L1) If people get what they deserve in the free market, then luck doesn't play a significant role in determining outcomes.

(L2) But it does.

(L3) So, people don't get what they deserve in the free market.

Argument from Full-Time Work

(W1) If people get what they deserve in the free market, then someone working full time making \$30 million/yr typically works 1000 times harder than one making \$30K/yr.

(W2) But they don't.

(W3) So, people don't get what they deserve in the free market.

Argument from Position of Birth

(B1) If people get what they deserve in the free market, then the children of the rich and poor alike will typically achieve roughly equal success.

(B2) But they won't.

(B3) So, people don't get what they deserve in the free market.