

## A Current Philosophical Dilemma:

### How Much Land is it Ethical to Own?

Bill Gates is the largest private owner of farmland in the United States. He owns 268,984 acres of farmland, across 19 states in the country. His farmland portfolio totals more than \$690 million in value. For comparison, the amount of United States farmland purchased by Gates is approximately the size of Hong Kong. Although there is a corporate entity purchasing the land for Gates, neither Gates nor his agents have explained the purpose of buying so much farmland, much of it very valuable and nutrient-rich. Some speculate that Gates' climate concerns may drive his interest, especially since farming and ranching contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. Other perspectives are that there is no explicit purpose, he is just diversifying his financial portfolio, which he has a right to do. Although Gates owns the most farmland, he is not the largest U.S. landowner. Billionaire John Malone, the former CEO of Liberty Media, is in the number one position, and owns 2.2 million acres of land, roughly twice the size of Rhode Island. Ted Turner owns 2 million acres. Jeff Bezos ranks 25th for private landowners, above Gates, and the famous Ford, Hearst, Koch and Reynolds families all rank in the top 100 landowners.

These patterns, of individuals in unique positions of wealth, buying and privately owning extensive parcels of U.S. land, including valuable, irreplaceable farmland, raises the philosophical question of whether it is ethical for one person, even if they have the unusual resources to do so, to individually possess so much of the earth itself.

In looking for ethical answers, a good place to start is John Locke's *Two Treatises on Civil Government*. In the work, Locke, the English philosopher considered to be the father of the

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Enlightenment, who made important contributions to the development of liberalism, makes several arguments relating to the ethical ownership of property. Locke believes that a person may only appropriate as much property as one needs or can use to continue life. (Two Treatises 2.31). He also believes one must leave “enough and as good” for others. (Two Treatises 2.27).

Looking at billionaire land purchases from a Lockean perspective, it seems the individuals have exceeded the amount of land that they ethically should be able to accumulate. We can assume from their publicized wealth, that they don't actually need the land to continue their lives in a reasonable way and exist soundly in nature. In a world of finite resources and limited land itself, large purchases, especially of valuable soil-rich lands that can be used for growing, runs contrary to the Lockean idea of leaving “enough and as good” for others. Other concerns above the ideological ones, are the practical ones. What if private landholders choose to use their purchases unethically? Could the purchases ever result in more limited food supply for others? Should several individuals get to make large decisions about land-use for a global world?

The ethical dilemmas raised here in Philosopher are important questions to think about. We look forward to hearing your perspectives!

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