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Ratio (new series) XXI 4 December 2008 0034–0006

JUSTICE IS NOT EQUALITY

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Abstract

This essay disputes G. A. Cohen's claim that John Rawls's argument for the difference principle involves an argument from moral arbitrariness to equality and then an illicit move away from equality. Moreover, the claim that an argument from moral arbitrariness establishes equality as the essential distributive justice ideal is found wanting.

Rescuing Justice and Equality is an original, subtle, and astute work of ethical and political philosophy.¹ From its justly renowned author, G. A. Cohen, we have come to expect no less. The work ranges over questions of ethical theory (metaethics) and normative political theory. My remarks address only the latter.

Cohen's book tries to develop both a sustained critique of some ideas on justice that had been affirmed by John Rawls² and a meditation on the ideal of socialism. This dual aim does not as one might fear force a split personality on the enterprise, which in fact shows a unified theme. Cohen interprets John Rawls as the quintessential liberal, urging that egalitarian justice can in principle be fully attained in a market economy setting. More important to Cohen is the way he sees Rawls distinguishing between public and private life in the just society. For Rawls, justice is a norm that mainly regulates the structure of major institutions – the basic structure of society. Individuals are bound by justice mainly to support just institutions when they exist or help bring them about when they do not, and to obey laws compatible with justice. Within just institutions, individuals are morally free to carry out their own projects and aims. This picture of the just society conjures up for Cohen the image of an economy in which

¹ G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2008). (Further references to this work will be enclosed in parentheses in the text.)

² See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

1 selfish individuals try to do as well for themselves as they can
2 within the just institutional rules. The image is defective, says
3 Cohen, and the defect precludes our calling a society that fits
4 the image a just society.

5 According to Cohen, the distributive justice component
6 of social justice requires that the distribution of benefits and
7 burdens across individual persons is fair, and bringing about
8 and sustaining the just distribution are the responsibilities of the
9 individual members of society not merely the standard for choice
10 of basic structural institutions. In Cohen's idea of a just society
11 individuals make their choices in daily life, within the limits of an
12 appropriate personal prerogative that each of us has to pursue
13 her own projects and aims, with a view to contributing to the good
14 of others and to bringing about a just distribution, which Cohen
15 supposes to be roughly an equal distribution. The shape and
16 structure of institutions must also satisfy principles of justice, but
17 that's not enough. In this connection one might compare the just
18 society and the society that overcomes racism. To qualify as non-
19 racist, it is not enough that a society's institutional rules should
20 prevent people from acting on racial prejudice when they interact
21 within basic institutions.

22 I am entirely in agreement with Cohen that whether or not
23 a society qualifies as ideally just depends not merely on the struc-
24 ture of its institutions but also on the dispositions and conduct
25 of its members. Cohen's way of pressing this point against Rawls
26 achieves a deep insight. One might put part of Cohen's point this
27 way: in the ideally just society, the dispositions and conduct of
28 the members, within the constraint of the personal prerogative
29 accorded to each individual to give extra weight to her personal
30 concerns in deciding how to live, do not limit the degree to which
31 the society fulfills the goal set by the justice standard. People's
32 dispositions are set so that they maximize the degree to which
33 justice goals are fulfilled. (Notice that this leaves it open to what
34 extent individuals should be motivated in daily life by concern for
35 the common good versus concern for their private good. Perhaps
36 beyond a certain point, being concerned to improve the lives of
37 others may be counterproductive. It is even abstractly possible that
38 each person's being disposed to care only for himself and those
39 near and dear to him would, in conjunction with a matching best
40 set of institutions, be maximally conducive to the achievement
41 of justice goals.) Cohen stresses a claim that goes further: in the
42 just society, each member embraces the ideal of social justice as a

1 goal and is dedicated to conducting her life so as to secure and
2 maintain it (modulo the personal prerogative). There is an atti-
3 tudinal component of the just society: a common devotion to the
4 common good. That the members of society have this attitude is
5 according to Cohen an intrinsic component of justice not merely
6 a good instrument for achieving justice.

7 One might wonder how any of this is relevant to a meditation
8 on socialism. One might suppose that the socialist following
9 Jean-Jacques Rousseau takes 'men as they are and laws as they
10 might be'³ and proposes public ownership of a society's produc-
11 tive resources as the best social arrangement under these con-
12 straints. If you instead take people as they ideally ought to be and
13 basic institutions as they ideally ought to be you are engaged
14 in what Rawls pejoratively calls the 'ethics of creation'.⁴ Cohen
15 disagrees. He thinks that what is just is what is ideally fair. What is
16 ideally fair in given circumstances depends on what those circum-
17 stances actually are. What would be ideally fair if humans could
18 secrete manna from their fingertips is not relevant. But to discover
19 what is ideally fair one should abstract from any limits in people's
20 willingness to comply with fairness constraints or to promote fair-
21 ness goals. So if equality turns out to be ideally fair, it remains
22 so even if we humans are so constituted that we are bound to act
23 against this norm. According to Cohen equality or something
24 close to it (equal access to advantage) does turn out to be ideally
25 fair upon reflection, and the essence of socialism is the idea of
26 a society that achieves this equality ideal and whose members
27 are dedicated to it. Cohen is of the opinion that institutions and
28 culture and individual will can shape motives, so socialist equality
29 may also be feasible, but it would remain ideally fair even if it were
30 motivationally out of reach.

31 If we then relax the constraint of assuming that humans will
32 go along with what is ideally fair, we then get a series of hard
33 questions centering on the issue, what is the best we can get to
34 from where we are now. The best place we can get to is the place
35 in which all our values properly weighed, not only our justice
36 values, are maximally realized. If we are deontologists and accept
37 moral constraints, we may want to amend the question: what is the

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39 ³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right* [1762], in
40 Rousseau, Donald Cress, ed., *The Basic Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing,
41 1987), p. 141.

42 ⁴ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 137.

1 best place we can get to, without violating moral constraints we
2 should accept, from where we are now.

3 From this standpoint, the Rawlsian enterprise can now be seen
4 to have strayed off-track in two important ways. Rawls the liberal
5 supposes that social justice is a norm that regulates primarily
6 institutions and only secondarily individuals (the general second-
7 ary requirement is to support acceptable institutions and comply
8 with their rules). On the contrary, Cohen sees distributive justice
9 as a set of principles that specifies a fair distribution of benefits
10 and burdens, good and bad fortune, to individuals, and holds that
11 one who accepts such principles must see them as normative both
12 as to what institutional arrangements she should support and what
13 courses of action she should choose. Rawls the theorist identifies
14 what is just with principles that would be chosen by persons who
15 were trying by his very choice of principles to produce the best
16 outcomes for themselves under constraints that assure impartial
17 choice. But this preliminary formulation, to be later refined and
18 developed in further discussion, already makes a big mistake in
19 Cohen's view. Rawls according to Cohen also veers off-track also in
20 a second way: People situated in a Rawlsian original position will
21 choose with a view to gaining better outcomes, but that postulated
22 motivation blends concern for fairness with concern for values
23 that have nothing to do with fairness (but that would go into an
24 assessment of outcomes all things considered).

25 I have already expressed agreement with Cohen on his first
26 critical claim. However, his second critical claim is dubious.
27 Whether or not the Rawlsian original position construction helps
28 to characterize the best conception of social justice (or the best
29 conception of the narrower ideal of distributive justice), a char-
30 acterization even of the narrower ideal does not go astray just in
31 virtue of assuming that the justice of a distribution of resources
32 depends in part on the extent to which that distribution, com-
33 pared to alternatives, improves the outcome by improving the
34 quality of people's lives. Even if you thought equality were a big
35 component of justice, why think it's everything?

36 37 **Against incentives**

38
39 Cohen frames his critique of Rawls as a critique of liberal justi-
40 fications of capitalism. The starting point of these justifications
41 is the idea of an equality-versus-efficiency tradeoff. Economic

1 equality, though desirable in itself, is a drag on economic produc-
2 tivity. A market economy is assumed to be an engine of economic
3 productivity, but tends to generate inequality in people's condi-
4 tion, especially over the long run, as effects of early random shifts
5 ramify and grow. If we reasonably care about both equality and
6 efficiency (productivity), we should uphold a market economy
7 modified by redistributive regulation and taxation and transfer,
8 up to the point indicated by the correct tradeoff ratio. So runs the
9 justification.

10 From this standpoint, Rawls's position might appear to be maxi-
11 mally egalitarian. The difference principle in its leximin formula-
12 tion asserts that (within the limits established by lexically prior
13 principles of justice) the basic structure of society should be set
14 so that it maximizes, as a first priority, the advantage level of the
15 worst off person, then as a second priority, the advantage level
16 of the second worst off person, and so on, up to the best off.⁵ One
17 could not tilt more strongly in favor of benefiting the worst off
18 than by adopting the difference principle.

19 Cohen demurs, in two ways. He observes that if inequality,
20 generated by incentive payments offered to talented persons to
21 induce them to work productively, would work to maximize the
22 position of the worst off, there is in principle another equally
23 productive possibility: the talented work at their most productive
24 employment and forego the incentive payment. In this scenario
25 their productivity gains are shared equally across all members of
26 society. If all members of society are committed to egalitarian
27 principles, and guide their economic choices by them, then no
28 incentive inducements are needed to sustain productivity, and
29 the equality-versus-efficiency tradeoff disappears, or rather, is no
30 longer a binding constraint on the pursuit of equality. Moreover,
31 the society in which individuals are regulated by egalitarian prin-
32 ciples in their daily economic choices as well as in their choice of
33 basic structure institutions is a more just society than one in which
34 only the latter choice is so regulated. (The moral requirement to
35 aim at the greater fulfillment of social justice goals in one's daily
36 economic choices is understood by Cohen to be limited by an
37 appropriate personal prerogative.)

38 The upshot is that according to Cohen a society that is through
39 and through just, just in the disposition of its members as well
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41 ⁵ On leximin, see Amartya Sen, 'Rawls versus Bentham: an axiomatic examination
42 of the pure distribution problem,' *Theory and Decision*, 4 (1974), pp. 301–310.

1 as in the shape of its basic social structure, will not display
2 incentive-generated inequality (modulo the prerogative).

3 Suppose that people are not through and through just and we
4 are thrust back in the realm of nonideal theory. The equality-
5 versus-efficiency tradeoff then reappears. Let us say that the aggre-
6 gate sum of advantages can be increased if inequality is instituted.
7 Perhaps we should institute some inequality – this depends on
8 further factors. A particularly uncontroversial case occurs if we
9 can make someone better off without thereby making anyone else
10 worse off. The Pareto norm then says we should move to some
11 position against which this complaint cannot be made. Satisfying
12 Pareto, we create inequality. Cohen insists that we should not now
13 say that inequality is recommended by distributive justice. Dis-
14 tributive justice, he affirms, continues to favor equality. We have
15 a conflict of values, and although no doubt in some cases the
16 aggregative and efficiency norms should be followed, we should
17 not misdescribe this choice as one that involves no sacrifice of
18 distributive justice.

19 Cohen accuses Rawls of failing to call things by their right
20 names here. Rawls affirms the difference principle as a principle
21 of distributive justice, but this affirmation confounds the true
22 egalitarian principle of distributive justice with the nonjustice
23 considerations that compete with it and that sometimes outweigh
24 it and determine what we ought to do all things considered. The
25 Rawlsian mix-up facilitates our viewing a capitalist economy, when
26 and if it would be justified by the difference principle, as fully
27 satisfying the principles of distributive justice, but viewing things
28 this way is wrong and glosses over a genuine unredeemed loss.
29 The mistake here is the same in character as the one we would
30 make if, finding in some unfortunate social circumstances that
31 slavery cannot be abolished without generating unacceptable
32 moral costs, we described the situation, in which all things
33 considered we should not act to eliminate slavery here and now,
34 as one in which slavery is just.

35 On Cohen's view, the Rawlsian mistake is especially poignant,
36 as we see when we notice following Cohen that Rawls's intuitive
37 argument for the difference principle is incoherent. Rawls
38 advances an argument from moral arbitrariness that establishes
39 equality of a certain sort as uniquely what distributive justice calls
40 for. Rawls then asserts a nonjustice value, the Pareto norm, and
41 claims that we are driven by that value to abandon the presump-
42 tion of equality established by the moral arbitrariness argument

1 and to embrace as our ultimate distributive justice value the dif-
2 ference principle, which says in effect, do the best we can for the
3 worst off, and pay no heed whatsoever to equality of condition
4 as per se morally valuable. An egalitarian argument leads to equal-
5 ity and then somehow incongruously lurches past it, pushed by
6 some other value entirely, and the principle we then end up with
7 is identified with distributive justice rather than as a compromise
8 with distributive justice or as a counterconsideration. So urges
9 Cohen.

11 Conceptions of justice

12
13 I shall argue that Cohen is wrong to find in Rawls's intuitive
14 argument for the difference principle an incoherent lurch past
15 insistence on equality of condition. I shall also examine from
16 several angles Cohen's rendering of the argument from moral
17 arbitrariness that is supposed to establish a strong presumption
18 in favor of equality. The argument does not look good from any
19 angle.

20 Even though we find in Cohen's discussions no good argument
21 for the claim that distributive justice demands equality, the claim
22 might nonetheless be correct. However, this is doubtful. My own
23 view is that the fundamental moral principle governing distri-
24 bution and all other justice matters is to be found in the family of
25 prioritarian principles, which say that one ought morally always
26 to implement an act or policy, among the alternatives, that would
27 produce no less moral value than anything else one might have
28 done instead, moral value being entirely a function of well-being
29 that accrues to individuals.⁶ (The moral value of achieving a gain
30 in well-being for an individual is greater, the greater its size, and
31 greater, the lower the person's lifetime well-being level would be
32 absent this benefit, and greater, the more deserving the indi-
33 vidual.) Priority versus Cohen-style equality involves a consequen-
34 tialism versus deontology issue that is irrelevant for purposes of
35 this discussion. Setting that issue aside, one can construe priority
36 as the idea that distributive justice is beneficence weighted by

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38 ⁶ On priority, see Derek Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', reprinted in Matthew Clayton
39 and Andrew Williams, eds., *The Ideal of Equality* (New York: Macmillan and St. Martin's
40 Press, 2000).

1 priority that varies depending on how badly off one is – this idea
2 might be set in a deontological frame with its paraphernalia of
3 constraints and options. Cohen clearly rejects this idea, and I
4 have no arguments for it, so this side of the discussion ends in a
5 standoff.

6 It's an odd standoff, seemingly more verbal than substantive.
7 Cohen insists that distributive justice demands equality, but allows
8 that other justice considerations might militate against equality,
9 and allows also that nonjustice moral considerations including
10 aggregative welfarist considerations might militate against the
11 lot of justice considerations, and perhaps rightly outweigh them.
12 He is opposed to priority in the sense that he does not declare
13 a commitment to it, and not in the sense that he declares a
14 commitment against it. His substantive claim is that priority, along
15 with the Rawlsian difference principle and other moral riffs, should
16 not usurp the name of *justice*.

17 It might seem tedious and fruitless to quarrel with a theorist
18 about the names she attaches to the entities that concern her.
19 Nonetheless I do want to quarrel with Cohen on this point. I
20 object to his definitional stipulations regarding the term *justice*.
21 Something, though perhaps not much, is at stake here. It is
22 perhaps worth mentioning that Cohen does not regard himself
23 as making a convenient definitional stipulation; he is asserting
24 what he regards 'our' conception of justice to be.

25 In ordinary English usage the term 'justice' tends to be applied
26 to what the speaker regards as a paramount value and also an
27 all-things-considered value. My dictionary ready to hand gives
28 as the first meaning for the 'justice' entry the following: 'moral
29 rightness, equity.' On this usage, if something is not morally right,
30 it's not just. John Rawls appeals to something like this usage in
31 the magisterial first sentences of *A Theory of Justice*. 'Justice is the
32 first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought.
33 A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or
34 revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter
35 how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished
36 if they are unjust. Each person possesses an inviolability founded
37 on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot
38 override.'⁷ Rawls starts with the formal point, that justice is the
39 paramount value in social relations, and then couples it with the

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41 ⁷ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 3.

1 polemical claim that justice, the trumping value, has nothing to
2 do with the maximization of welfare.

3 Back in 1861 John Stuart Mill had in effect protested against
4 the move that Rawls is making.⁸ Mill more or less asserts that in
5 a narrow sense of the term *justice*, it might be counterposed to
6 anything that smacks of utility-maximizing, but there is also a
7 broad sense of the term, perhaps more common, according to
8 which it is an all-things-considered and hence paramount moral
9 evaluation of social matters. It is illegitimate to slide between the
10 narrow and broad senses to convey the impression that obviously
11 justice broadly conceived has nothing to do with utility. On the
12 contrary, says Mill, even those who take equality to be the essence
13 of the ideal of justice, end up adjusting the ideal so that inequali-
14 ties that are expedient are not deemed unjust, nor are equalities
15 that are inexpedient deemed to be just.

16 I'm with Mill up to a point. When judgments invoke the idea of
17 justice as a trumping value, it is also an all-things-considered value,
18 and it is a wide open question, to what extent increasing aggregate
19 human well-being is a consideration included in the calculation.
20 I would go further. When justice is identified with equality, it is
21 equality of treatment that is in play, and the notion of equality
22 here is formal, that people who are in relevant respects the same
23 should be treated the same. Any ideal of substantive justice
24 appeals to fairness, and it is part of our idea of fairness that if a
25 resource is worth a lot to you and a little to me, you should get
26 it (I would add that how badly off each of us would otherwise be
27 is also a factor). 'Be reasonable!' you might say if I act as a dog in
28 the manger, hogging a resource that does hardly anything for me
29 when the cow really needs it to get fed. 'Be fair!' you might just as
30 well say in that situation.⁹ Cohen asserts that when we are talking
31 specifically about *distributive justice*, whether a distribution is just
32 depends on what one person gets as compared with what others
33 get, and the operative notion of justice here is equality, nothing
34 except differential fault or choice or desert serving to justify
35 inequality. I simply report that I don't find in my own convictions
36 any trace of this supposed ideal of distributive justice; nor do I

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38 ⁸ J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* [1861], George Sher, ed. (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing,
39 1979), chapter 5, paragraph 10.

40 ⁹ The non-dog-in-manger principle should surely be incorporated in any plausible
41 interpretation of the ideal of socialism. On the principle, see Brian Barry, *The Liberal Theory*
42 *of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

1 see that it is derivable from more basic common-sense convictions
2 we should be loathe to relinquish.

3 Cohen might wish to argue in a revisionary spirit that we ought
4 to accept his distributive ideal, but it would be misleading to claim
5 any entitlement much less exclusive entitlement to the word
6 'justice' with its powerful connotations. I suggest it would make
7 for clarity if he used a fresh invented term for his ideal, say
8 *distributive jarstice*. Then a reader like me could register that
9 he does not care at all for distributive jarstice without thereby
10 seeming to insinuate that he cares not at all for the paramount
11 all-things-considered value in social relations, or not at all for the
12 more specific value of fairness in social relations.¹⁰

13 Cohen objects that Rawls plays fast and loose with the notion
14 of *distributive justice* when he allows that, with other principles in
15 place, a distribution of resources that satisfies the difference prin-
16 ciple is just, fully accords with the conception of distributive
17 justice that we ought to accept. The difference principle in one
18 of its formulations says that an inequality in resource shares is just
19 provided that it works to maximize the set of resources (primary
20 social goods) that goes to the worst off. Cohen proposes to
21 identify distributive justice with luck egalitarianism.

23 Equality and moral meritocracy

24
25 Some regard the canonical statement of luck egalitarianism to be
26 this formulation introduced by luck egalitarian Larry Temkin: 'It
27 is bad (unjust and unfair) for some to be worse off than others
28 through no fault [or choice] of their own.' Call this the Temkin
29 formulation (it's from his book *Inequality*).¹¹ Cohen affirms
30 roughly the same view, when he avows his conviction Cohen
31 affirms roughly the same view, when he avows his conviction 'that
32 an unequal distribution whose inequality cannot be vindicated by
33 some choice or fault or desert on the part of (some of) the
34

35 ¹⁰ But isn't the prioritarian being equally revisionary in denying that it matters at
36 all (except instrumentally) from the standpoint of justice, how one person's condition
37 compares to the condition of others? My point is simply that Cohen cannot appeal to any
38 uncontroversial common notion to buttress his claim that distributive justice essentially
39 requires equality.

40 ¹¹ Larry Temkin, *Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 13. In footnote
41 21 on the same page he adds to his formulation the words 'or choice' that I have added in
42 square brackets.

relevant affected agents is unfair, and therefore pro tanto unjust, and that nothing can remove that particular injustice' (p. 7).

And some might regard this as a necessary supplement to this canonical statement of luck egalitarianism: 'It is morally bad (unjust and unfair) if some have less than others beyond the level of inequality that is proportionate to the comparative merit (faultiness) of their choices.' Unless you add the supplement, or something along this line, your luck egalitarian principles set no limit on how much worse off than another it is acceptable for a person to be, given that she has behaved in a manner that is more faulty, even by a smidgeon, than the other person or persons with whom her condition is being compared.

The Temkin formulation looks to be unpromising as a canonical statement of any sort of egalitarianism, because it is ambiguous. It is (can be interpreted as) fully compatible with the following: 'It is morally bad (unjust and unfair) if some have the same as others through no merit of their own.' This says it is morally bad if some make less meritorious, more faulty choices than others yet end up with the same as what others get. And both the Temkin formulation and the just-stated claim can be read as partial statements of moral meritocracy. The full statement of moral meritocracy would be: 'Each person should get good fortune in life according to her moral merit (the degree to which her choices are faulty, compared to others' choices)'. (This is not quite right, because the Temkin formulation includes an odd causal requirement – whether inequalities are good or bad depends on the causal process through which the inequality arises. My statements of moral meritocracy extrude the odd causal requirement.) Interpreted as a partial statement of moral meritocracy, Temkin's supposedly canonical statement of luck egalitarianism affirms no sort of egalitarianism at all. I don't claim this is the only possible way to read his statement of principle – I claim it is ambiguous.

To get any sort of egalitarianism unambiguously into the picture, you need to amend or interpret the Temkin formulation so it tilts in favor of equal distribution in some way: Perhaps it might be read as asserting: Equality is morally desirable, provided that inequality does not arise through fault or choice. (This is neutral on the issue, what is desirable when inequality does arise through fault or choice.) Another possibility: Add to the Temkin formulation a straight affirmation of equality: It is morally better if all have the same. Another possible view is that equality

1 is morally desirable only provided the equal desert condition
2 obtains, and it is morally desirable that the equal desert condition
3 obtains.

5 Cohen versus Rawls

6
7 Cohen argues that Rawls produces an intuitive argument for the
8 difference principle that illicitly moves from (a) premises that
9 appeal to the value of equality to (b) a conclusion that affirms the
10 difference principle as the core principle of distributive justice.
11 However, the difference principle, most clearly in its leximin
12 formulation, attributes no value whatsoever to equality. According
13 to the leximin difference principle, justice requires (against a
14 background of equal basic liberty and fair equality of opportunity)
15 that as a first priority, the primary goods allocation going to the
16 person with least primary goods be maximized, then as a second
17 priority, the primary goods allocation going to the second-worst
18 off person be maximized, and so on up to the best-off person.
19 In other words, the difference principle instructs us to arrange the
20 basic social structure so as to make the worst off as well off as
21 possible, and to let the equality chips fall where they may. Cohen
22 protests that there is an incoherence in this argument. From
23 premises affirming the intrinsic moral value of equality, how can
24 you validly reason to a conclusion that says *inter alia* that equality
25 is not intrinsically morally valuable at all?

26 Rawls in my judgment is innocent of the error that Cohen
27 accuses him of making. Cohen himself starts with the strong
28 antecedent opinion that equality of condition is a very important
29 and central justice value, in fact for Cohen it turns out to be the
30 entirety of distributive justice when properly elucidated. Holding
31 this opinion, he finds it charitable to Rawls to impute to him
32 similar views on the basis of his claims about the moral arbitrariness
33 of the natural lottery. I admit these claims exhibit a Cheshire
34 Cat elusiveness, but deny that they are best construed so as to
35 reveal the argument Rawls builds from them to be incoherent.

36 However, not much hinges on this dispute. If it is true that
37 Rawls moves from 'equality per se matters' premises to 'equality
38 per se does not matter' conclusions, this merely indicates that
39 Rawls, a pioneer in the articulation of contemporary egalitarianism,
40 is not perfectly clear at the start about how the considerations
41 that move him fit together into a plausible account of justice

1 paired with good arguments supporting it. If Rawls ends up
2 retracting some of what he asserts at the beginning of the discus-
3 sion, that in itself is not a good reason to reject his final judgment
4 that 'equality per se does not matter.'

5 The relevant passages in Rawls occur in chapters 1 and 2 of *A*
6 *Theory of Justice*. In chapter one, explaining why the basic social
7 structure deserves to be the primary subject of justice, Rawls states
8 that over time the basic social structure brings it about that people
9 begin their adult lives with very unequal holdings and prospects of
10 primary social goods, and these initial inequalities cannot possibly
11 be justified by appeal to individuals' differential desert. The fun-
12 damental task of a theory of distributive justice is to specify what
13 justifies such inequalities when they are justified. In chapter two
14 Rawls objects to the 'system of natural liberty,' roughly a society
15 in which free speech and civil liberties are protected and a free
16 market economy with private ownership of resources operates
17 under the constraint of careers open to talents. Rawls observes:

18
19 The existing distribution of income and wealth, say, is the
20 cumulative effect of prior distributions of natural assets – that
21 is, natural talents and abilities – as these have been developed
22 or left unrealized, and their use favored or disfavored over time
23 by social circumstances and such chance contingencies as acci-
24 dent and good fortune. Intuitively, the most obvious injustice of
25 the system of natural liberty is that it permits distributive shares
26 to be improperly influenced by these factors so arbitrary from a
27 moral point of view.¹²

28
29 Rawls is appealing to a moral judgment he expects his readers
30 to share, to the effect that when morally arbitrary factors such as
31 sheer good and bad luck in people's initial social and natural
32 circumstances and in the way that the ensemble of people's
33 desires continually reshapes itself into supply and demand condi-
34 tions significantly influence the outcomes of free market competi-
35 tive trading over time, the mere fact that distributive outcomes
36 result from free trading in a competitive market economy does
37 not suffice to justify these outcomes. Something more is needed.
38 In other words, all Rawls is committed to in the passage under
39 examination is (a) there is some initial presumption in favor of

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41 ¹² Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 63.

1 equal distribution and (b) the sheer fact that a distribution arises
2 by free market trading, even by free market trading starting from
3 a presumed fair starting point, does not suffice to overcome this
4 initial presumption. Rawls says the system of natural liberty allows
5 distributive shares to be 'improperly influenced' by the sheer
6 luck of the natural lottery and market fluctuations. This suggests
7 these factors might be regulated, without being eliminated or
8 entirely offset, in such a way that they would properly influence
9 distributive shares.

10 Rawls starts with a presumption in favor of equality of con-
11 dition, and in the course of his reflections this presumption is
12 overridden. In the end the presumption as it were disappears
13 without trace. This need not betoken inconsistency. Analogy: One
14 might start with a presumption in favor of the idea that when one
15 is speaking to someone, one ought to be polite to that person.
16 This presumption might be thought to be provisional. It disap-
17 pears without a trace, for example, if one discovers one is address-
18 ing the person who brutally murdered your child and has shown
19 no remorse. One might say the presumption is conditional: If
20 the person one is speaking to has not done something that makes
21 her the appropriate target of outraged or contemptuous or some
22 other form of rude speech, there is a pro tanto moral reason to
23 speak politely to that person.

24 A presumption in favor of equality of condition might be of any
25 of a wide range of normative strengths. At one extreme, one
26 might hold that if one knows nothing at all about a number
27 of persons and one has to allocate goods among them some-
28 how, since there is no basis for treating anyone asymmetrically, a
29 respectful policy is to divide the goods equally across the persons.
30 This very weak presumption gives way once any reason at all
31 appears to give more goods to some rather than others. Alter-
32 natively, a presumption could be held to be stronger, and over-
33 rideable only by good enough reasons, and what counts as 'good
34 enough' might be variously specified.

35 I don't mean to advance any heavy-duty theses that would sub-
36 stantially contribute to a moral theory of presumptions. My point
37 is that a presumption can be provisional, in the sense that its
38 presence at the start of inquiry is compatible with its entire disap-
39 pearance without remainder by the end of inquiry, or compatible
40 with its thoroughgoing transformation into a doctrine of a quite
41 different character during the course of normative inquiry. And
42 a presumption can vary in strength, down to the vanishing point.

Moral arbitrariness

Rawls exegesis aside, does the moral arbitrariness claim provide an argument for equality of condition?¹³ Suppose one asks, would the fact that people's holdings came about via free and voluntary market trading from a fair initial starting point justify those present holdings? One might answer No on the ground that whatever moral principle required a certain pattern of holdings at the start, that same principle would almost certainly be violated as people's holdings change in the course of market interaction, so at some point a return to a distribution closer to the initial starting point would be required. (To argue in this way would be to run Robert Nozick's celebrated Wilt Chamberlain argument in reverse.¹⁴) In further support of that answer, one might add that the nature of free market trading is not such that it automatically provides legitimacy to whatever outcome results, especially after many rounds of trading. What one gets in trading depends on many chance circumstances including one's stock of traits and how those traits interact with the ensemble of supply and demand conditions to provide opportunities to some and deny opportunities to others.

The moral arbitrariness objection so construed objects to a proposed departure from an initial starting point. Nothing says this starting point has to be equality. One could just as well use the argument to defend feudal inequality, construed as presumptively normative. Suppose one begins with the natural inequality proposal: aristocrats should get more of the good things in life, because blue blood courses through their veins, and others should get less, because their blood is metaphysically inferior. The suggestion is then ventured that over time in free market trading, some non-aristocrats will end up with about as much as their natural superiors, and will deserve their holdings earned in market interaction, even though the end result is a trend toward equality of condition. Back comes the moral arbitrariness objection: It is sheer unmerited luck, good or bad, that renders some people able and others unable to command high prices for the goods and services they offer in market interaction. So the equalizing tendency of market interaction – its tendency not to

¹³ On this question, see Susan Hurley, *Justice, Luck, and Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 160–164.

1 preserve the starting point inequality between the aristocrats
2 and the others – is tainted by its source in a morally arbitrary
3 causal process. The outcomes of market trading especially when
4 repeated without redistributive correction over a long run, are
5 determined in large part by accidents of birth, genetic endow-
6 ment and favorable early socialization and education, and the
7 like. Any equalization brought about by such a morally arbitrary
8 process has no moral weight against the opposed norm of pre-
9 serving an initially morally privileged starting point, in this case,
10 feudal hierarchy and inequality by fixed rank.

11 The advocate of the moral arbitrariness argument construed
12 as an argument for equality of condition might at this point be
13 of the opinion that I have reinforced her case by this futile effort
14 to tear it down. She now asserts that feudal hierarchy itself suc-
15 cumbs to the moral arbitrariness objection. Inequality of con-
16 dition justified by the quality of individual lineage assessed by
17 aristocratic standards is itself morally arbitrary if anything is.
18 One finds oneself with aristocratic lineage or not as a sheer
19 matter of brute luck beyond one's power to control. Seeing that
20 one cannot use the moral arbitrariness objection to buttress
21 any arbitrarily selected initial pattern of distribution suggests
22 its inherent egalitarian affinity. Once one notices that choice or
23 desert is the only morally nonarbitrary cause of unequal out-
24 comes, one sees also straightaway that equality of condition is
25 a morally privileged baseline – the two thoughts are flip sides
26 of the same coin.

27 The easiest way to see that this train of thought is mistaken is
28 to note that the moral arbitrariness objection in effect insists
29 that what qualifies an individual as deserving or undeserving
30 must not be a matter of sheer luck but must rather lie within her
31 power to control. This idea can be embraced by someone who
32 rejects equality of condition as any sort of distributive ideal –
33 presumptive baseline, final end point, or anything in between.
34 As I have already had occasion to mention, one might hold that
35 it is bad – unjust and unfair – if some are worse off than others
36 through no fault of their own and also hold it is bad – unjust
37 and unfair – if some are just as well off as others through no
38 merit of their own and interpret both assertions as partial state-
39 ments of a moral meritocracy view: Each person should have
40 good fortune or bad fortune over the course of her life in cor-
41 respondence with what she deserves. Equality has no inherent
42 value at all on this construal.

Moral arbitrariness again

Cohen finds in Rawls an argument from the moral arbitrariness of the sources of inequality to the claim that from the standpoint of distributive justice, it is unfair if some have less than others. This claim is qualified: It is unfair if some have less than others unless the inequality has a nonarbitrary cause. The argument according to Cohen does not begin with an assumed moral presumption in favor of equality of condition but rather establishes a moral presumption in favor of equality of condition.

I find this argument as Cohen presents it hard to construe, so I reproduce two of his formulations:

Cohen identifies his view as one that 'justifies equality as a starting point on the Rawlsian ground that the standard causes of inequality are morally arbitrary' (p. 155).

Page 156: 'The moral arbitrariness claim, which combines a post-medieval principle that none should be worse off than others through no fault of their own and modern sociological sophistication about the actual causes of how people fare' is said to 'put accidentally caused inequality under a cloud, as far as justice is concerned.'

The argument might be rendered as follows:

1. Differences in people's condition brought about by morally arbitrary causes are unjust.
2. The only causes of differences in people's condition that are not morally arbitrary involve differential desert.

Therefore

3. Differences in people's condition are unjust unless they are brought about by processes involving differential desert.

According to 3, inequalities that arise as incentive payments to specially talented individuals qualify as morally arbitrary and hence as unjust. Since only differential desert, or more broadly factors that lie within the individual's power to control, can generate inequality on a nonarbitrary basis, the Rawlsian attempt to begin with an argument from moral arbitrariness to a presumption in favor of equality and then to use that position as a foundation from which to establish the justice on inequalities that work to the advantage of the worst off is fundamentally flawed.

1 The moral arbitrariness argument establishes a tie between justice
2 and equality that considerations of what is advantageous for this
3 or that social group are unable to break.

4 The easiest way to see that the moral arbitrariness argument as
5 construed by Cohen only supports a presumption of equality if
6 it assumes this presumption at the outset is to note that the taint
7 of moral arbitrariness can attach just as readily to equality as to
8 inequality. Consider this argument:

- 9
- 10 1. Sameness in people's condition brought about by morally
11 arbitrary causes is unjust.
 - 12 2. The only causes of sameness in people's condition that are
13 not morally arbitrary involve equal desert.
- 14

15 Therefore

- 16
- 17 4. Sameness in people's condition is unjust unless it is brought
18 about by processes involving equality of desert.
- 19

20 Since what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander,
21 the moral arbitrariness argument, if acceptable at all, is just as
22 successful at establishing an apparent presumption in favor of
23 inequality, in its second formulation, as it was in establishing an
24 apparent presumption in favor of equality, in its first formulation.
25 The operative word here is "apparent." In fact the two arguments
26 are compatible; they involve an assertion of a moral meritocracy
27 position: People ought to get gain better or worse conditions of
28 life corresponding to their moral deservingness. The more deserv-
29 ing one is, the better one's condition ought to be. Distributive
30 justice is distribution of good fortune corresponding to each indi-
31 vidual's level of deservingness. Inequality of condition is unjust
32 when it obtains among persons who are equally deserving and
33 equality of condition is unjust when it obtains among persons who
34 are unequally deserving.

35 The symmetrical position just described is broken only if one
36 assumes at the outset that everyone's condition or quality of life
37 ought to be the same, unless there is some special consideration
38 in the circumstances that justifies inequality. This means that
39 the argument that Cohen says establishes a presumption for
40 equality in fact achieves that position only if one arbitrarily inserts
41 the assumption of a presumption for inequality into the initial

1 premise. No moral arbitrariness plus a presumption for equality
2 implies a presumption for equality.

3 The moral arbitrariness argument as construed by Cohen is
4 flawed in a more fundamental way than I have so far hinted at.
5 The flaw lies in the idea of morally arbitrary causes of people's
6 condition. Suppose that Mother Teresa has led an exemplary life,
7 and Hitler has led a thoroughly evil life; the one is a saint and the
8 other a villain. So far the circumstances of their lives have con-
9 spired to bring exactly the same degree of good fortune to each.
10 Both are leading lives of middling quality. Then by chance a rock
11 falls on one of the two; forever spoiling the injured person's life,
12 because the injuries are painful, disabling, and can neither be
13 healed nor offset by any available compensation. So inequality of
14 condition then obtains: One of the two ends up leading a life that
15 is good in the sense of good for the one who leads it (obtains the
16 good that the virtue of prudence takes as its object). Surely any
17 view of justice that allows a role to considerations of deservingness
18 should hold that it issues in a more just outcome if it is Hitler and
19 not Mother Teresa who is the one hit on the head by a rock with
20 unfortunate consequences. However, if one holds with Cohen
21 that it is morally bad (unjust and unfair) if some are worse off than
22 others through no fault of their own, then one must hold that it is
23 morally bad (unjust and unfair) that Hitler and Mother Teresa in
24 this imaginary story end up unequally well off, with Hitler worse
25 off – since in the story it is through sheer bad brute unchosen
26 luck, and not any fault of his own that Hitler is bonked by the
27 randomly falling rock with harmful consequences.

28 At this point the advocate of the moral arbitrariness argument
29 might dig in her heels and defend the special causation require-
30 ment incorporated in it. One might deny that it is deservingness
31 over the course of one's life – deservingness in the air, one might
32 say – that determines one's eligibility for being on the short end or
33 the long end of the stick when inequality might be established.
34 Rather the justifiability of an inequality depends on how that
35 particular inequality is brought about. Suppose that Emma volun-
36 tarily engages in a series of gambles, which might have turned out
37 badly for her, but did not. Then she is hit by a random meteor.
38 The risk of suffering this accident could not have been reduced
39 or enhanced by any reasonable course of action she might have
40 taken, and no meteor collision insurance was available to her. If
41 Emma is now worse off than others through no choice of her own,
42 this inequality is tainted by its morally arbitrary origin in sheer

1 brute bad luck. The fact that she engaged in prior gambles that
2 turned out to be inconsequential is neither here nor there for the
3 assessment of the inequality of condition that now afflicts her.

4 The proposal under review now is that from the standpoint
5 of distributive justice, it is unjust if some are worse off than others
6 unless one who is worse off has freely chosen the course of action
7 that led to this outcome (or could have, but did not, advert to a
8 possible course of action one might have taken, that would have
9 been reasonable to take and would likely have left her no worse off
10 than others). The deservingness, merit, faultiness, or demerit
11 of the agent's conduct is not relevant. I find this an unappealing
12 construal of the Temkin luck egalitarian ideal, but let that pass.
13 The proposal also seems to invoke an unspecified fair framework
14 for interaction, within which choices that lead to your being worse
15 off than others reduce your claims to restoration to equality, but
16 let that pass. However, setting these issues aside, I still insist that
17 this notion of moral arbitrariness works in tandem with the idea of
18 a morally privileged baseline distribution, departures from which
19 are then claimed to be acceptable only if nonarbitrary. The
20 morally privileged baseline could be the distribution that is con-
21 ductive to maximizing utility, or anything else. Nothing says it has
22 to be equality.

23 Suppose we amend the moral arbitrariness argument in a way
24 that eliminates the special causation requirement that had been
25 built into it.

- 26
- 27 1. Differences in people's condition are unjust if they are
28 brought about in such a way that there is no good justifica-
29 tion for them.
 - 30 2. The only good justification for differences in people's con-
31 dition involves differential desert of the unequally placed
32 individuals.
- 33

34 Therefore

- 35
- 36 3. Differences in people's condition are unjust unless they
37 involve the differential desert of the unequally placed
38 individuals.
- 39

40 The problem with the reformulated argument is that whereas
41 premise 1 now is unexceptionable, premise 2 looks false. There
42 are plausible justifiers of differences in people's condition,

1 inequalities in their well-being or advantage levels enjoyed over
2 the course of their lives, other than differential deservingness.
3 One plausible candidate justifier is that the status quo could be
4 improved by introducing an inequality that renders one or more
5 persons better off and no one worse off. Another plausible candi-
6 date justifier is that the status quo could be improved by intro-
7 ducing an inequality that renders some better off and some worse
8 off but in such a way that the gains of the gainers – discounted and
9 amplified by the moral value of achieving gains for those persons
10 given how well off or badly off they would otherwise be – exceeds
11 the losses of the losers – discounted and amplified by the moral
12 disvalue of imposing losses on those persons given how well off or
13 badly off they would otherwise be. There are other plausible
14 candidates.

15
16 **Conclusion**

17
18 There is much to like and embrace in *Rescuing Justice and Equality*.
19 My arguments have focused on Cohen's attempt to rescue the
20 idea of equality as a distributive justice ideal. Under examination,
21 the attempt looks to be unsuccessful.

22
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SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd.	
Journal Code: RATI	Proofreader: Elsie
Article No: 409	Delivery date: 8 September 2008
Page Extent: 21	