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THE DEMANDS OF EQUALITY

By Christine Sypnowich*

Abstract: *Ever since the publication of G. A. Cohen's essay "If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?" the matter of personal responsibility for the amelioration of economic disadvantage has become a question for egalitarian political philosophers to wrestle with both theoretically and personally. This essay examines "the demands of equality" in light of an egalitarian philosophy that focuses on human flourishing. I consider Cohen's call for personal commitments to the egalitarian project to show both the power and problems of his approach and propose an alternative view, where individuals' concern for living well involves an engagement with the demands of equality, but also some respite from its strictures.*

KEY WORDS: equality, justice, egalitarianism, personal responsibility

"Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man
That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
Because he does not feel, feel your power quickly;
So distribution should undo excess,
And each man have enough."
—William Shakespeare[1]

I. Introduction

"Think global, act local" is a popular slogan that urges us to consider the international scope of political issues, but also to address them in our personal lives. It's a big ask. From the philosopher's perspective, it might seem that the challenge lies principally in trying to understand the many complex dimensions of global justice, but the imperative to commit personally to action to remedy social ills is no less challenging. This is an imperative

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[1] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.1.69–73.

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that we hear often, as we are enjoined as individuals to "do the work" on issues ranging from global warming to racism.

Ever since the publication of G. A. Cohen's humorously entitled essay, "If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?"[2] the matter of personal responsibility for the amelioration of economic disadvantage has become a question for egalitarian political philosophers[3] to wrestle with both theoretically and personally. Progressives find it difficult to figure out how much one is helping or hurting the planet in one's everyday decisions about consumption. Even more difficult is for relatively well-off egalitarians (such as academics who might be reading this article) to understand their personal obligations to redistribute wealth. Citizens pay their taxes and can act on their democratic rights to support progressive political parties, but it is unclear how they are responsible to further distributive justice beyond that. Yet, the evidence of the hardship experienced by those whose life prospects are worse than our own is omnipresent in city streets, classrooms, "McJobs," and homeless shelters.

In this essay I examine what I call "the demands of equality" in the light of an egalitarian approach that focuses on human flourishing. I consider, first, why contemporary egalitarianism takes a statist cast that eschews questions of personal obligations to promote equality. Next, I turn to Cohen's call for personal commitments to the egalitarian project to show both the power and problems of his approach. I then proffer my alternative, where individuals' concern for living well involves an engagement with the demands of equality, but also some respite from its strictures.

II. The Scope of Equality

John Rawls's famous argument for the redistribution of wealth centers on the "difference principle," whereby inequalities are justified if they are to the benefit of the worst-off. Rawls does not endorse incentives per se, but he countenances the possibility of an incentive structure that enables greater productivity that could be harnessed to benefit the worst-off.[4] Cohen counters that a society truly committed to remedying inequality would not permit disparities of wealth in order to give incentives to the talented. If, as Rawls contends, talent is morally arbitrary and not a basis for unequal rewards, it is unfair that "high fliers" (that is, those who have the potential to be highly successful) can insist on such rewards in order to produce more social product to distribute to the worst-off. Cohen elaborates this with

[2] G. A. Cohen, "If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?" *The Journal of Ethics* 4, nos. 1-2 (2000): 1–26.

[3] Egalitarian philosophers broadly understood; prioritarians would also be concerned with this question.

[4] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 78; John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 67–69, 77, 78.

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the idea of an "interpersonal test" for the rich person's justification to the worst-off person.[5] "Hey, me getting richer is good for you because then I'll be productive," could prompt the worst-off person to say, "Oh yeah? Even better would be if you were productive without getting richer, so there'd be more income for the rest of us."

Cohen endorses a pluralism about values and emphasizes how community and justice are separate ideals; justice, he contends, however important is but one of the virtues of social institutions.[6] Accordingly, his use of community in this context is not the usual sense, as he jokingly says, of "some soggy mega-Gemeinschaftlichkeit" of warm mutual identification. Rather, he more narrowly means what one can justify to another in light of agreed-upon principles of justice where, if we are committed to the principle of equality, the talented among us cannot turn around and demand higher pay.[7] "Justificatory community" means that in order to remedy inequality, individuals agree to forgo distribution based on market success; moreover, they will be just as productive as they would be were they to enjoy the benefits of market success.

Rawls does not use the word community per se; however, his ideas of the well-ordered society as a fair system of cooperation—involving public justification, reciprocity, civic friendship, fraternity, and a concern for the dignity of others—all play a similar role. It has been suggested that, in this light, solidarity might be added to the primary goods that we seek to afford individuals when reasoning about justice behind the "veil of ignorance."[8] In Rawls's project, community might mean only that we share in one another's fate while each having our own lives to live. Rawls contends that justice pertains to the "basic structure"—public institutions such as law and markets—and thus self-seeking behavior such as the pursuit of financial incentives is allowed so long as such behavior is not unlawful. Rawls holds that the basic structure is the appropriate locus for justice for two reasons. First, it issues from the decision procedure of justice as fairness. Second, its effects are "so profound and present from the start."[9]

Cohen contends that the latter rationale is especially disputable, given the profundity of all kinds of factors that can have unjust effects that do not issue from state institutions. For Cohen, the famous feminist slogan "the personal is political," coined to illuminate the unjust power relations within the intimate domain and the need for their just resolution, is also instructive for socialist equality, which needs more than public institutions

[5] G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 42–45.
[6] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 302–3.
[7] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 32.
[8] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 45, 76–81; see also Adam Cureton, "Justice and the Crooked Wood of Human Nature," in *Distributive Justice and Access to Advantage: G. A. Cohen's Egalitarianism*, ed. Alexander Kaufman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 93–94.
[9] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 7.

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to achieve its goals.[10] Rawls, who vacillates on the matter of whether the family is a subject of justice, admits that coercion is not the hallmark of institutions of justice, thereby opening the door to considering a range of decisions and behaviors relevant for egalitarianism.[11] Indeed, Cohen finds the form of the feminist critique instructive precisely because, as he puts it, the "personal choices to which the writ of law is indifferent are fateful for social justice."[12]

The "basic structure argument" prompted many philosophers to come to Rawls's defense, insisting that justice is the property of institutions backed by the force of law, the basic structure of society, rather than the myriad of personal decisions people make outside that structure. As Cohen admits, egalitarians of both liberal and Marxist stripes tend to agree that inequality is best addressed by institutional means.[13] This can be illustrated by the distinction between duties of justice and duties of charity. Duties of justice are examples of "perfect duties," specific "both with regard to the content of what is required and with regard to the identity of the individual who is the object of the duty," while duties of charity are characterized by indeterminacy about who to aid and how.[14] Moreover, government institutions can take a systematic approach to ensure that all citizens have a minimum set of resources. Charitable gift-giving, in contrast, is ad hoc and contingent, relying on the random sympathies of individuals. In addition, charity involves a paternalistic relation between donor and recipient that seems alien to relations of justice that obtain among citizens of equal standing. If it is just that there be equality, then the badly off are entitled to resources; they should not have to supplicate for them.

The argument for public institutions of redistribution is an argument against relying solely on the vicissitudes of private charity.[15] However, it does not show that just policies can never be supplemented by private actions. Cohen's case for a broader understanding of justice seems principally to be about efficacy. A person who favors a more equal society can do something about it, however modestly by, for example, philanthropic gift-giving. If redistribution as currently organized falls short of our egalitarian goals, then justice may require that we supplement the provisions of the welfare state with our own charitable efforts, if we have the means to do so. Thus, Cohen asks, "how can one deny, without ado, that one is obligated to forgo the benefits one enjoys as a result of what one regards as injustice, when one can forgo them in a fashion that benefits sufferers of that injustice?"[16] Just as

[10] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 116–18.
[11] Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 182, 164–65; see also Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 133–34.
[12] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 140.
[13] Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 148–50.
[14] Allen Buchanan, "Justice and Charity," *Ethics* 97, no. 3 (1987): 558, 570.
[15] See, however, the libertarian rejoinder of Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 265–68, but see also Colin Macleod, "If You're a Libertarian, How Come You're So Rich?" *Socialist Studies* 8, no. 1 (2012): 68–81.
[16] Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian,* 161.

Peter Singer calls upon the duties of passersby to save a drowning child,[17] Cohen appeals to the idea that we all have the opportunity to supplement state policy with our own efforts.

Thus, for Cohen, if we are egalitarians who live in societies that do not fully realize our ideals, our egalitarian commitments should involve not just complying with policies of distributive justice, but also giving up personal resources to render the less fortunate more equal.[18] Examples of just personal choices include not just high-fliers reining in demands for high salaries and low taxes,[19] but also talented people pursuing occupations that are socially useful[20] and affluent parents forgoing private schooling for their children.[21]

In the case of the parent-child relationship, Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift insist that consistent egalitarians have recourse to private education only when their child's well-being is suffering significantly in the state-provided system.[22] Moreover, parents should refrain from "illegitimate favoritism" that advantages their children, such as "take your child to work" days, which "potentially entrenches socially stratified roles."[23] Swift even says that grounds of egalitarian justice dictate that highly intelligent children who are likely to succeed should, prima facie, not have bedtime stories read to them if that will particularly advantage them.[24] Parental partiality can compromise egalitarian principle only when there is an "overriding moral consideration," such as the "familial relationship goods" that come from the intimate experience of parents and children reading bedtime stories together.[25]

III. The Personal versus the Political

The feminist argument for public scrutiny of unjust personal relations, in particular the power husbands have historically wielded over wives, insists

[17] Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229–43.

[18] Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 128, 149; Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 117. Liam Murphy makes a similar argument in his "Institutions and the Demands of Justice," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27, no. 4 (1998): 251.

[19] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 70, 143.

[20] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 184; but see also Paula Casal, "Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough," *Ethics* 117, no. 2 (2007): 296–326, and Michael Otsuka, "Freedom of Occupational Choice," in *Justice, Equality, and Constructivism*, ed. Brian Feltham (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 74–87.

[21] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 175; see also Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, *Family Values* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[22] Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, "Legitimate Parental Partiality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2009): 43–80; Brighouse and Swift, *Family Values*; Adam Swift, *How Not to Be a Hypocrite* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[23] Shlomi Segall, *Equality and Opportunity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 164.

[24] See Adam Swift, "Justice, Luck, and the Family: The Intergenerational Transmission of Economic Advantage from a Normative Perspective," in *Unequal Chances: Family Background and Economic Success*, ed. Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, and Melissa Osbourne Groves (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 269–72, 274. See also Segall, *Equality and Opportunity*, 164–65.

[25] Brighouse and Swift, "Legitimate Parental Partiality," 57.

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that the family is a site of power that should answer to the demands of equality and freedom.[26] Nonetheless, gender justice cannot help but appreciate the special character of relations among family members. Described as a "haven in a heartless world,"[27] the intimate domain is characterized by valuable relationships crucial for human well-being, a refuge from both the glare and anonymity of public life. That private realm has been celebrated for fashioning an alternative ethic of care that can correct or complement the public principles of justice by emphasizing obligations to attend to the particular needs of vulnerable human beings with whom one has special relationships.

That the family is in its essence a private space prompts some defenders of Rawls to reject Cohen's effort to draw an analogy between familial and personal justice. For example, although Andrew Williams expresses confidence that Rawls's theory can be applied to matters of gender inequality, he also insists that principles of justice are, above all, action-guiding and so must satisfy a publicity requirement, which is enabled by restricting justice to the basic structure, that is, public institutions that are regulated by coercive law. Applied to personal decisions in the economic context, Cohen's alternative understanding of justice, Williams contends, is inevitably complex and confusing. Citizens will find it difficult to know whether they are following adequately the dictates of a general exhortation to make egalitarian personal choices. Moreover, the results would be unjust, since the adoption of such dictates by citizens would inevitably vary, with some doing more than their share and others doing less.[28]

However, Williams's publicity requirement seems to be a preoccupation with "checkability," that is, whether one can check to ascertain that an obligation is being fulfilled, which also looks fatal for gender justice. Paula Casal argues that jobs vary in their burdens and people are unequally able and resilient, so it would be impossible to determine whether all individuals are meeting their moral obligations to contribute to a socialist society. Likewise, sometimes it is difficult to detect when husbands are shirking domestic responsibilities, but it is irrelevant to the demands of domestic justice in any particular case whether others are living up to these norms or not: "gender inequality is unjust, and the fact that it cannot be made to disappear with simple, clear, easily checkable rules does not make it less so."[29] In any case, gender inequality in one household can hardly be defended by reference to the fact that it can also be found in other households. Certainly, gender justice does not entail police officers entering the

[26] A slogan coined in the 1970s, but particularly well-deployed by Susan Moller Okin in her *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

[27] Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977).

[28] Andrew Williams, "Incentives, Inequality, and Publicity," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27, no. 3 (1998): 225–47; Andrew Williams, "Justice, Incentives, and Constructivism," in *Justice, Equality, and Constructivism*, ed. Feltham, 110–26.

[29] Paula Casal, "Marx, Rawls, Cohen, and Feminism," *Hypatia* 30, no. 4 (2015): 823.

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family home to determine whether a selfish and lazy husband dwells within. The personal is personal, even if it is also political, but that does not mean the husband's behavior is irrelevant for justice.

Although we may agree that society's efforts to redistribute wealth can be furthered by the personal choices of individuals, even the most committed egalitarians may feel special obligations to provide for their loved ones rather than ameliorate the disadvantages of co-citizens. It is not obvious that personal loyalties that conflict with public commitments should simply be overridden. Indeed, Cohen's critics contend that considerations about the importance of the personal undercut the argument that individuals' choices should be constrained by considerations of justice. There may be cases, for example, where one has a greater family burden in the light of a sibling's needs or where one partner sacrifices career ambitions for the sake of the other; greater financial reward may be a reasonable aim for those with pressing family obligations. David Estlund contends that people may legitimately refuse to take certain positions unless the remuneration would enable them to discharge such personal commitments.[30]

Cohen concedes that people should be permitted to exercise a "personal prerogative" to a "modest right of self-interest,"[31] but such a move raises more questions than it answers as to how this prerogative is justified and weighed against egalitarian obligations. Higher rewards for certain positions can be justified in light of the arduous, risky, or stressful work such positions entail, which Cohen calls a "counterbalancing equalizer."[32] A system of compensation for special obligations might also be something that an egalitarian scheme would consider. However, because personal attachments are valuable for all of us, it would be unjust if only the better-positioned have the opportunity to honor them.[33] Estlund's argument allows those who have a privileged market position—such as Cohen's "high-fliers"—to blackmail society into letting them earn extra income. However, the equal society should enable everyone—not just those who enjoy market success—to care for their loved ones.

Thomas Nagel formulates the problem of how our personal interests can be at odds with our egalitarian obligations with the idea of a tension between two standpoints occupied by individuals: the partial and impartial. We confront an inevitable "division of the self." On the one hand, we see the world from our individual points of view where personal preoccupations that are "extremely important" to us are salient. On the other hand, we

[30] David Estlund, "Debate: Liberalism, Equality, and Fraternity in Cohen's Critique of Rawls," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (1998): 99–112. See also Samuel Scheffler, "Is the Basic Structure Basic?" 102–29, and Thomas Scanlon, "Justice, Responsibility, and the Demands of Equality," 70–87, both in *The Egalitarian Conscience: Essays in Honour of G. A. Cohen*, ed. Christine Sypnowich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[31] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 61.

[32] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 103.

[33] Otsuka concludes this in a trenchant left-libertarian argument in his "Prerogatives to Depart from Equality," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 58 (2006): 111.

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recognize that the world exists in abstraction from our particular place in it and that everyone's life matters as much as our own.[34] We can appreciate the impartial perspective because we understand that having our own, particular concerns is something we share with others. However, this will hardly change the individual's reluctance to sacrifice the personal for the political.

Nagel contends that the more realistic objective is to eliminate significant deprivation by setting a bar below which no one should fall, but to permit inequalities as the inevitable consequence of people's motivation to be productive so long as they and their families will benefit. The "irreducibility" of the personal view that is "always present alongside" the impersonal standpoint rules out, then, a truly egalitarian society. So long as human beings have the motivations they presently have, people will "want material comforts, good food and vacations in Italy," but we cannot expect that they will "not feel right about these things if other members of their society could not afford them." Nagel admits that, on his view, the two perspectives have poor prospects for integration: "an acceptable combination of individual and political morality remains to be invented."[35]

Our reluctance to yield fully our personal preoccupations suggests an inevitable gap between the ideal and reality, such that Thomas Scanlon ruefully concludes that Cohen's issue with Rawls ultimately centers on "how the world should be rather than what social institutions should be like."[36] Arguably, Cohen appreciates this when he argues that Rawls's more moderate egalitarianism is best understood in terms of "rules of regulation" rather than principles of justice, a result of being hidebound to the limitations of motivation and imagination of people as we find them.[37]

IV. Equality and Human Flourishing

The steps needed to further egalitarianism in societies whose redistributive policies fall short seem arduous and difficult to realize. Does this make equality a questionable ideal? It is worth reflecting, at this point, on what the egalitarian project is all about. Here, I will venture that ultimately what we are seeking to equalize is human well-being or flourishing.[38] Although there is insufficient space here for a full defense of my flourishing approach, I will sketch some of its key features in order to address the demands of equality.

I contend that what should matter for egalitarians is how people are doing, including not only whether they are housed, nourished, educated, and healthy, but also whether they are included in their communities, can

[34] Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 18.
[35] Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, 126–29.
[36] Scanlon, "Justice, Responsibility, and the Demands of Equality," 86.
[37] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, chap. 7.
[38] What follows are some of the key points in my *Equality Renewed: Justice, Flourishing, and the Egalitarian Ideal* (London: Routledge, 2017).

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enjoy culture and nature, and participate in valuable pursuits. A just distribution of wealth is a means to enable recipients to enjoy well-being. We care about inequality because of its effect on people; the problems of inequality seem less pressing, if the putatively unequal are doing equally well in their quality of life.[39] Most egalitarians, in contrast, answer the question "Equality of what?" by reference to goods, income, or resources—the instruments to well-being—rather than the constituents of well-being itself. This focus on what Rawls calls "all-purpose means," things people want "no matter what else" they want, stems from an uneasiness about a political commitment to what living well means.[40] As Jonathan Quong puts it, the state should be neutral and not treat citizens "as if they lack the ability to make effective choices about their own lives."[41] Martha Nussbaum specifies a list of capabilities that she argues have universal value,[42] but she too endorses Rawls's political liberalism and insists that the state should play no role in promoting certain ways of life. In order to find agreement among reasonable doctrines about how to live in the face of irresolvable controversy on such questions, Nussbaum holds that political institutions should "refrain from asserting that autonomy is a key element in the best comprehensive view of human flourishing." To "dragoon all citizens into functioning in these ways," she adds, would be "dictatorial and illiberal."[43]

Cohen proffers "access to advantage," however tentatively, as his preferred "currency" of equality, incorporating ideas of both resources and welfare so that, for example, we can take account of the complex disadvantages of the person who lacks mobility and experiences pain. He is thus attracted to Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, which focuses on "what goods do for a person," though Cohen has reservations of what he dubs the "athleticism" of a focus on capacities. As Cohen puts it, "We must look at his nutrition level, and not just, as Rawlsians do, at his food supply, or as welfarists do, at the utility he derives from eating food," but also, contra the capabilities approach, we must distinguish "what the good does for the person from what he does with it."[44] Cohen regrets that his position suffers

[39] I am following Derek Parfit's position that egalitarianism must be premised on a person-affecting claim; see Derek Parfit, "Equality or Priority?" in *The Ideal of Equality*, ed. Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams (London: Macmillan, 2000), 81–125. Thomas Piketty's influential work notes how the inequalities of capitalism can be a "source of powerful political tensions" without really addressing what is bad about unequal wealth per se; Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 570.

[40] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 94.

[41] Jonathan Quong, *Liberalism without Perfection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 106; John Rawls's *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press,1993) is the best-known version of the neutralist view.

[42] See, e.g., Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). The capabilities approach of Nussbaum, with its focus on constituents of well-being such as health or literacy, inspires my flourishing approach; see also Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[43] Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 171.

[44] G. A. Cohen, "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (1989): 943–44.

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from an "unlovely heterogeneity,"[45] and I like to think my human flourishing approach might prove a welcome synthesizing framework. I share with Cohen a concern to capture a range of considerations, for example, that people enjoy equal well-being whether their favored pursuits be photography or fishing, that pain and disability be mitigated, and that unequal well-being caused by "despondency" or "gloominess" be tackled.[46]

There is more consensus on this approach than one might think. Contrary to the warnings of neutralist philosophers, liberal-democratic societies regularly decide on the constituents of human well-being. Funding for the arts is undertaken to ensure that valuable pursuits such as public access to music or paintings are not left to the mercy of market forces. Zoning bylaws qualify individuals' property rights by stipulating such things as maximum height for buildings, conservation of heritage sites, or the provision of green space to further the well-being of a city's inhabitants. In all these cases, the community opts for ways that are minimally coercive, possibly diminishing the wealth of the better-off, in order to enable people to live well. On the understanding that valuable ways of life may disappear if not fostered, such strategies do not narrow, but broaden the opportunities for well-being, taking a pluralistic view of the constituents of living well, from Fauré to football, paintings to parades.

A focus on flourishing brings into view the plight of people worse off than ourselves: the homeless person, the drug addict, the child who comes to school without breakfast or homework in hand. These are all examples of lack of flourishing among our fellow human beings whose lives vividly illustrate our obligation not just to pay our taxes, but also to contribute to organizations that seek to remedy shortfalls in well-being by offering a place to sleep for people living on the street, providing addiction counseling and support, or distributing breakfast to children in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Zeroing in on well-being enables us to ensure that our priorities are to improve the kinds of lives people live.

In articulating the egalitarian flourishing approach, I intend to press not only a particular metric of distribution, but also equality per se. I contend that equality is too quickly abandoned in contemporary debates about distributive justice,[47] so equality of flourishing should be our aim, even if we cannot easily or fully achieve it. Elsewhere I contend that equality of outcomes, not just opportunities, be our goal.[48] Equality is the fundamental,

[45] Cohen, "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," 921.

[46] Cohen, "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," 923, 921, 930.

[47] See Christine Sypnowich, "What's Left in Egalitarianism? Marxism and the Limitations of Liberal Theories of Equality," *Philosophy Compass* 12, no. 8 (2017): 1–10.

[48] Christine Sypnowich, "What's Wrong with Equality of Opportunity," *Philosophical Topics* 48, no. 2 (2020): 223–44. See also, Christine Sypnowich, "Is Equal Opportunity Enough?" which is the lead article with responses from (followed by my reply to) Gina Schouten, Martin O'Neill, Nicholas Vrousalis, Anne Phillips, William M. Paris, Leah Gordon, Claude S. Fischer, Zofia Stemplowska, Lane Kenworthy, John Roemer, and Ravi Kanbur, *Boston Review*, May 10, 2023, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/is-equal-opportunity-enough/.

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animating ideal in this picture, according to which each person matters as much as another, so it follows that it is unfair if some are better off than others. The pursuit of equality is elusive, and thus egalitarians might settle for sufficiency or that the worst-off are given priority; certainly, those goals would remedy the hardships suffered in my examples above. Even if we ameliorate disadvantage, though, that does not mean there is no value in going further to achieve equality.[49] A deontological principle of fairness is at stake, which is made vivid by the different kinds of lives different people get to—or are forced to—live. Moreover, according to the metric of flourishing, which appreciates the range of considerations relevant for well-being, "distinctively egalitarian concerns"[50] are at play. Community contributes to well-being; human beings are better off when they do not live in societies of hierarchy and the consciousness of inferiority and superiority, where human relations are not characterized by disrespect, servility, exploitation, mistrust, and hostility.

Aiming for equality of flourishing confronts an obvious challenge in diversity in talent, temperament, likeableness, and so forth, which means that however radical our redistributive policies, some of us may not flourish as much as others. We may be a beautiful Adonis or a homely Shrek or, perhaps more significant, constitutionally cheerful and optimistic Pollyannas or glum Eeyores who have difficulty finding joy in life.[51] Gaps in attributes—not just our looks or disposition, but also the problem of self-destructive tendencies that a socialist society could help us overcome—though elusive to address, have powerful effects. To be imprudent, pursue toxic relationships, and too easily give up on one's goals are examples of how people's lives go less well in ways they tend to come to regret. A focus on flourishing, rather than the mere means to flourishing, keeps us attentive to the importance of trying to mitigate, as best we can, roadblocks to equality in how we live. At the same time, such an approach allows for maximization of flourishing. High levels of well-being that are unevenly enjoyed must answer to the court of justice and the egalitarian principles that justice entails, but "leveling down" is to be avoided, to enable people to live maximally well.[52]

V. The Egalitarian Ethos

Egalitarianism is especially challenged by the personal-obligation problem, since while a focus on priority or sufficiency means that one can achieve the amelioration of significant disadvantage and then be on one's way, a

[49] Casal, "Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough," 307.
[50] Martin O'Neill, "What Should Egalitarians Believe?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36, no. 2 (2008): 130.
[51] These examples refer to the fictional Pollyanna of Eleanor Porter's *Pollyanna* books and Eeyore of A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* books.
[52] Sypnowich, *Equality Renewed*, 114–16.

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concern for equality means that the egalitarian will still have work to do. However, a focus on flourishing can help us to address the problem of demandingness. Cohen devises "a social ethos which inspires uncoerced equality-supporting choice" to help individuals support the egalitarian project.[53] Without such an ethos, he contends, we might hope that people "choose against the grain of nurture, habit, social pressure and self-interest," but we can hardly blame and shame individuals who pursue legally permitted, indeed expected, goals.[54] The idea of a common set of values that enable egalitarian behavior is captured in Cohen's example of a camping trip where campers do not insist on a private title to equipment, skill, or know-how.[55] On the principle of "share and share alike," campers come to the aid of the person who forgot to bring a necessary tool and let others in on knowledge about the best fishing spot or source of tasty apples. Anyone who acts otherwise is manifestly at odds with the ethos of the venture; Cohen argues that the resulting flourishing of all participants demonstrates the appeal of the socialist ideal.

It may seem that we are revisiting Karl Marx's idea of "communist man," a newly designed person with a set of comradely capacities. So beyond our current reach is this idea that some Bolsheviks, such as Alexander Bogdanov, engaged in imaginative devices for its achievement—from blood transfusions to imbue people with "brotherly love" to fantastic speculation about a "red planet" with different kinds of beings.[56] The October Revolution mined a long-standing socialist theme, found also in the French utopian socialist Charles Fourier's proposal that comradely duty would mean that the young and beautiful would undertake romantic encounters with the less desirable.[57] We should not conclude from such flights of fancy, though, that the ethos enjoined by Cohen is impossible to achieve.

Critics may contend that a group of friends who go camping is hardly a model for large-scale social organization, but Cohen adduces the inspiration of "moral pioneers" who live by an egalitarian social ethos. Cohen's favorite example is the British during World War II, who rallied to make personal sacrifices to fight fascism. The imperative to "do your bit," he argues, was both pervasive and voluntary among patriotic Britons, demonstrating how ordinary people can live by a collectivist moral code in their everyday lives.[58] A vivid recent example is how, during the global pandemic, so many people were inspired by the credo that "we are all in this together" and resolved to "stick together by standing apart," reminding us of how individuals are capable of acting for the good of the more vulnerable.

[53] Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 131.
[54] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 141–42.
[55] G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
[56] See Christine Sypnowich, "Death in Utopia: Marxism and the Mortal Self," in *The Social Self*, ed. Christine Sypnowich and David Bakhurst (London: Sage, 1995), 84–102.
[57] See Sypnowich, *Equality Renewed*, 142.
[58] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 142.

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Stepping up to discharge a personal obligation to uphold the political ideals of a society during a crisis such as world war or a global pandemic might seem to tell us little about duties of justice during normal conditions. For one thing, those situations are temporary; exhortations among citizens summoned an exceptional effort to bring about peace so that such efforts would no longer be necessary. Moreover, fear plays a role in both cases—fear that the Nazis might be at the door or that oneself or one's loved ones might die of a terrible disease. Nonetheless, it is interesting how classical-liberal thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, for all their differences, were agreed that selfishness would be too rampant in extreme situations under conditions of fear and thus the "circumstances of justice" would not obtain. That ordinary people have, in fact, been exceptionally cooperative, self-sacrificing, and committed to the common good in dire situations gives one hope that we could, with appropriate guidance, be motivated by an extralegal social ethos under normal conditions. Cohen invokes the exemplar of husbands who, in the early days of feminism, took on their share of domestic labor without the impetus of law or convention. These were individuals who not only lived by, but initiated, a progressive social ethos.[59]

Nonetheless, the importance of the social ethos for the achievement of egalitarian justice suggests that justice and community are not, as Cohen supposes, separate values. We saw that Cohen, in his critique of Rawls, uses a restricted sense of community as "interpersonal justification" to make a justice-based argument against incentives. Cohen sometimes suggests that community and justice are mutually reinforcing, as when he proposes that markets are to be abandoned because they breed injustice, but also because self-interest and its corollary—an attitude of "greed and fear"—undermine community.[60] Jonathan Wolff, too, contends that there is "more to a society of equals than a just scheme of distribution of material goods" and that "the attitude people have toward each other" is also relevant.[61] Yet, in his defense of socialism, Cohen is candid about how his understanding of justice follows "luck-egalitarian" principles and would permit inequalities that are the result of "regrettable choices."[62] Such inequalities, however, would be at odds with his proffered ethos of "communal caring." Thus, "in the name of community," we should ensure that these inequalities, though just, are remedied. As Nicholas Vrousalis sums up, justice judges distribution, but community judges motivation, and we should be motivated to mitigate the unfortunate distributions prescribed by justice.[63] Cohen is not

[59] I explore some of these ideas in Christine Sypnowich, "The Rule of Law and the Social Ethos," in *Routledge Handbook of the Rule of Law*, ed. Michael Sevel (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

[60] Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* 44, 80–81.

[61] Jonathan Wolff, "Fairness, Respect, and the Egalitarian Ethos," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27, no. 2 (1998): 104–5.

[62] Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* 26.

[63] Nicholas Vrousalis, *The Political Philosophy of G. A. Cohen* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 113.

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comfortable with this upshot and remarks, without resolving the matter, that "it would be a great pity if we had to conclude that community and justice were potentially incompatible moral ideals."[64] I contend that his position has such unfortunate consequences.

If, as I suggest, justice refers to equality of well-being—drawing out Cohen's own "access to advantage" idea—and among the constituents of well-being are values such as companionship, friendship, or belonging,[65] then community is part and parcel of justice, not just an additional support or remedy for the parsimonious consequences of a narrow view of justice's principles. A flourishing view thus takes issue with Cohen's regrettable conversion to luck egalitarianism that causes him to sever justice and community in an unhelpful way.[66] The flourishing view can also address Nagel's fatalism that egalitarianism would fail to find support among divided selves whose self-interest cannot be overcome. Individual well-being depends on a robust understanding of justice and community because one's ability to enjoy well-being involves a just context where the development of one's projects and personal pursuits are unfettered by their inegalitarian preconditions.

If we are to "walk the talk" of egalitarianism in societies that have not yet fulfilled the ideal of equality, we must not only vote the right way, campaign for the progressive candidate, and not cheat on our taxes. Even making hefty donations to good causes—which, as Cohen notes, may not be easy to do but can make a difference—does not suffice. We need to, as it were, "*think* the talk," in the sense of fully engaging with the problem of how our fellow human beings are failing to flourish in our still unequal societies. Cultivating the kinds of sensibilities needed to further egalitarianism entails not just writing checks, but also developing a richer understanding of the needs of others and the injustice of disparities in flourishing. The Black Lives Matter movement has prompted soul-searching among many of us, challenging us to go beyond our expressed views and commitments, to rethink entrenched social behaviors, tastes, and inclinations.

What is needed is empathy, the capacity to attune ourselves to the needs of others beyond our family to neighbors and colleagues, fellow citizens and strangers. In our unequal society, awareness can come with the phenomenology of an encounter with a person in need, such as someone asking for money on a city street. The spectacle of human suffering occasioned by the beggar is famously illustrated in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, where Lear's flight to the heath enables him to empathetically share in the distress of

[64] Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* 34–38. See also Cohen, "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," 933.

[65] Jonathan Wolff, "Fairness, Respect, and the Egalitarian 'Ethos' Revisited," *The Journal of Ethics* 14, nos. 3–4 (2010): 338.

[66] David Miller is insightful on this point in his "The Incoherence of Luck Egalitarianism," in *Distributive Justice and Access to Advantage*, ed. Kaufman, 147–49.

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his impoverished subjects. Other characters are also moved to pity and generosity; the blinded Gloucester proclaims to the beggar who turns out to be his son:

> Here, take this purse, thou whom the heaven's plagues
> Have humbled to all strokes. That I am wretched
> Makes thee the happier.[67]

I argue elsewhere that confronting the beggar's manifest lack of well-being should stir in us an awareness of the basic humanity of needy people to whom we have no connection.[68] King Lear instructs us that, as Michael Ignatieff points out, "the test of human respect is in life's hardest cases: not in one's neighbour, friend or relation, but the babbling stranger."[69] Rich egalitarians, if they truly are egalitarians, should thus appreciate their luck in Rawls's natural lottery and how they are no better than the next person when it comes to the entitlement to a flourishing life.

VI. Problems of the Self

A personal connection to the project of equality has wide benefits. First, it helps to ensure that we sustain the public institutions that promote equality and give them our support. Second, it means we are more likely to discern public institutions' shortcomings when it comes to their effectiveness in ameliorating inequality and to work toward improving them. Third, the personal connection will mean that we are not motivated to shirk our public responsibilities, be it as high-fliers seeking incentives or as imprudent decision-makers whose choices cost the community.

Moreover, the egalitarian's concern for others not only grounds and nurtures egalitarian institutions. It is also a posture that enables self-development—or what we might term, following Aristotle, a cultivation of virtue.[70] Caring for others is a constitutive good, not only an instrumental one. It is part of what we need not only to serve our ends, but to have ends at all or ends that make our lives count for something. Being impervious to the appeals of beggars is, therefore, a way of injuring ourselves. Who would want to find oneself displaying the callous indifference so well described by Bertolt Brecht?

> Man has the abominable gift of being able to deaden his feelings at will, so to speak. Suppose, for instance, a man sees another man standing on the corner with a stump for an arm; the first time he may be shocked enough to give him tenpence, but the second time it will only be

[67] Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.1.74–76.
[68] Sypnowich, "Begging," in *The Egalitarian Conscience*, ed. Sypnowich, 177–94.
[69] Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984), 42.
[70] See esp. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

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> fivepence, and if he sees him a third time he'll hand him over to the police without batting an eyelash.[71]

A social ethos in an unequal society should foster in us a persisting unease, a sense that it would be a violation of a fundamental norm of humanity, always to refuse the shabbily dressed person so manifestly worse off than oneself who asks, "Spare any change?"

Being rich among the poor is not a high quality of life; if one is impervious to this claim, then arguably one has a lesser character and lives a lesser life. Inequality damages human flourishing for everyone in a society; such a system insults everyone, even, Ronald Dworkin contends, "those who profit in resources from the injustice."[72] If people are divided by class, insecure and uneducated, cooperation among citizens is hampered by condescension, servility, and resentment. People focus on acquiring and retaining wealth where there is inequality and anxiety about financial security. Moreover, persons with fabulous wealth risk having their values corrupted, measuring worth in terms of status rather than goods and activities pursued for their own sake. In such contexts, individuals avoid valuable but nonremunerative pursuits. In contrast, Thomas Hurka notes, "a society of material equals is unlikely to be one in which people's main aims are monetary."[73]

Considerations about equality's benefits for the previously advantaged are controversial. They call upon egalitarians to regard their loss in personal wealth to be not just fair, but also good for them and truly put to the test their commitment to their principles. Of course, the benefits of equality to the rich egalitarian are hardly the main justification for egalitarianism, just as Marx's claim that the propertied were alienated under capitalism is not the main argument against capitalist exploitation. From a human flourishing perspective, though, appreciating the wide benefits of equality of wealth should help nurture our sensitivity to the wrong of inequality and fortify our resolve to combat it.

An egalitarian social ethos still faces several pitfalls. First, a modest but still important matter is the paradox of the "do-gooder," who in doing the right thing comes to feel self-congratulatory or self-satisfied, is keen to impress others with their righteousness, and risks becoming a person of bad character. It is a familiar problem: someone acts on principles of justice in their personal life and falls prey to unattractive behavior such as virtue-

[71] Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2008), 1.1.

[72] Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 280. Amartya Sen notes that "shared communal benefits" of basic education "may transcend the gains of the person being educated." Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 128. The effect of equality on health, educational performance, and social relations is charted in Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

[73] Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 172; see also MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 188, on instrumental rationality and playing chess.

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signaling, martyrdom, ostentatious self-denial, and a narcissistic preoccupation with the self. "Who can enjoy such talk?" asks Kurt Baier of moralizing discourse more generally.[74] Philosophers note that "moral grandstanding" is what happens when, in seeking recognition for one's virtue, one's moral contributions become a "vanity project."[75] It may seem that the benefits derived from the acts of the do-gooder outweigh their annoying character traits, but on my flourishing model, the self-development of persons matters. Moreover, such behavior can have a negative impact on justice. If one's desire for recognition is strong enough, it can supplant the true purpose of the moral behavior, impairing the extent to which one genuinely does good. Self-aggrandizement can also have a corrosive effect on public discourse, leading to cynicism, "outrage exhaustion," and polarization.[76]

For his part, Cohen was not moralistic or sanctimonious. Indeed, he was slightly uncomfortable with the title for the collection of essays I edited in his honor, noting with his usual wit that "the egalitarian conscience" might suggest that he is "holier than I am. I am certainly not holier than I am; indeed, it's a good bet that I am not even holier than thou." He did not want to seem "so grim, so inspecting, so admonishing, so unremittingly judging."[77] In conversation, Cohen was adamant that the extravagant displays of a George Orwell or Ludwig Wittgenstein (Orwell slept rough in Paris and Wittgenstein gave away all his possessions), were hardly what he had in mind in proposing that egalitarians take personal responsibility for their principles. Such puritanical displays are not what being an egalitarian is all about. Hairshirt-wearing ascetism is a far cry from the human-flourishing model of equality I propose. Not only would conceiving of oneself as particularly exceptional betray a lack of egalitarian virtue, and thus mark a deficit in well-being, it does nothing to further equality. How to calibrate self-attunement without self-absorption is a difficult question, but a focus on well-being would be mindful of the constituents of a well-lived life, both our own and the lives of others.

Moreover, there are grounds to believe that Cohen's idea of a social ethos would rule out the idea that individual interests are to be effaced. As a focus on flourishing reminds us, human beings after all have projects, goals, and lives to live. In an early essay, Cohen criticizes Bolshevik jurist Evgeny Pashukanis for supposing that under communism the individual "submerges his ego in the collective and finds the greatest satisfaction and meaning of life in this act," devoting himself to the needs of others.[78] We

[74] Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View: A Rational Basis of Ethics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958), 1.

[75] Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, "Moral Grandstanding," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 44, no. 3 (2016): 199, 215.

[76] Tosi and Warmke, "Moral Grandstanding," 210.

[77] G. A. Cohen, "Thanks," in *Egalitarian Conscience*, ed. Sypnowich, 249.

[78] Evgeny Pashukanis, *Selected Writings on Marxism and Law*, ed. Piers Beirne and Robert Sharlet, trans. Peter Maggs (London: Academic Press, 1980), 160; for Cohen's criticism of

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do not need to make the "infantile" move that individuals' interests can be wholly subsumed in the community in order to overcome egoism.[79] Cohen here seems to be picking up on a remark made by Marx himself, that communism would not be "the love-imbued opposite of selfishness."[80]

The egalitarian social ethos, therefore, cannot mean that people no longer have discrete concerns or interests. Indeed, for us to live by a social ethos requires attention to the matter of our self-interest, for a number of reasons.[81] Bernard Williams holds that altruism should be understood not as "a strenuous and unsolicited benevolent interference," but as a general disposition to consider the claims of others' interests as grounds for limiting one's projects.[82] Altruism would otherwise be incoherent, for to act altruistically, one must admit the validity of self-oriented interests. Altruistic behavior would be impossible, if all define their interests to be to further those of others, with no one confessing to having self-regarding interests that others could take on as their own.

This is not just a problem of the mechanics of altruism; it has a conceptual foundation. As Nagel notes in his essay on altruism, "altruistic reasons are parasitic upon self-interested ones," since we need to grasp how a person's self-interest could have moral importance that outweighs other considerations.[83] Our own interests must therefore matter to us for us to understand what it is like to have an interest others should have reason to further on one's behalf. Successful altruistic acts are the result of altruists' imagining empathetically what they would want were they the persons for whom they are acting; this cannot be done, unless one understands what it is like to care about one's self-interest.

Instead of the traditional models of self-interest or altruism, a community of equals requires a richer understanding of the relations among citizens, such as that evoked by the *Communist Manifesto*'s principle that "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."[84] Marx and Friedrich Engels here have a surprising affinity with Hume, who contends that the hope for a "happy harmony" of individuals' interests assumes what he termed the "circumstances of justice," where justice is

Pashukanis, see G. A. Cohen, "Self-Ownership, Communism, and Equality," in G. A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 134–35. See also Tom Campbell, *The Left and Rights* (London: Routledge, 1983).

[79] Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*, 135.

[80] Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 41.

[81] This discussion draws on Christine Sypnowich, *The Concept of Socialist Law* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1990), 124–28.

[82] Bernard Williams, "Egoism and Altruism," in Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 250.

[83] Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 17.

[84] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Communist Manifesto," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Tucker, 491.

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required not only because of scarce resources, but also because individuals' self-interest can be tempered by moral virtue. If we were all a "second-self to another" and made "no division betwixt our interests," there would be no need of justice.[85]

VII. Doing Good and Living Well

The problem of the "do-gooder" points to another potential negative impact of personal egalitarian obligation, that is, the risk of an "oppressive existence," where the egalitarian is hounded by the question of whether their self-directed projects should be forfeited to further greater equality. In his discussion of the rich egalitarian, Cohen puts this problem in terms of a "right to a private space," a right that would be at risk if there were an expectation that one "keep the demands of the poor before or at the back of one's mind" or "have continual regard for the condition of the poor."[86] Again, we can put this issue in terms of the quality of people's lives. Egalitarianism should aim to equalize without causing mental hardship for those who seek to help. Oscar Wilde remarks that the "chief advantage" of socialism would be that people no longer "spoil their lives" by "very seriously and very sentimentally" devoting themselves to "remedying the evils" of poverty with remedies that "do not cure the disease" but in fact "are part of" it.[87]

In Cohen's picture, however, personal obligations to bolster equality are not just remedial measures necessitated by the flawed here and now; they would persist in an egalitarian utopia, so that individuals would be expected to continue to abide by an egalitarian commitment to improve and enhance just public policy. In the case of someone who prefers gardening but would make a much more valuable contribution to society as a physician, Cohen contends, "it is sometimes right not to force people to do what they are obliged, as a matter of justice, freely to choose to do." What is needed, he continues, are informal processes that engender "a structure of response lodged in the motivations that inform everyday life" rather than rules that "severely compromise liberty if people were required forever to consult such rules."[88] As Cohen puts it, people are best placed to know the "total situation" of their lives; giving scope for the personal considerations I noted above, he says that "one person's easy bit is another person's hard bit and figuring out what's hard for whom is an unmanageable task." Thus, he concludes that although institutions might be envisaged that would

[85] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (London: A. Millar, 1751), 36, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004806387.0001.000/1:7?rgn=div1;view=fulltext.

[86] Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 168.

[87] Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," in *Complete Works* (London: Hamlyn, 1983), 915. Interestingly, Cohen alludes to Wilde's point in his *If You're an Egalitarian*, 168n32.

[88] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 220, 123. Nonetheless, this is more demanding than the position ventured in his *If You're an Egalitarian*, which focuses on obligations due to inadequate institutions.

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reinforce the social ethos,[89] it is up to individuals to interpret the social ethos rather than look wholly to coercive law.[90]

Cohen intends this open-endedness to respect individual freedom, but the effect risks, if not hectoring, needling individuals to do more for equality, even when the best possible egalitarian institutions are in place. For the egalitarian who cares about equality, this prospect cannot help but be oppressive. Williams famously argues that utilitarianism reduces individuals to vehicles for a social goal, a channel for maximum satisfaction of the aggregate aims of society. Utilitarianism erodes individual integrity because, Williams says, it alienates people from the convictions that are the source of their actions. Though premised on moral individualism's understanding of the importance of all people's well-being, utilitarianism ends up undermining it.[91] In like spirit, we should ward against rendering persons equality-maximizers.[92] We cannot treat well-being as a maximand, the equalization of which expects individuals to voluntarily forfeit their other personal commitments. Well-being is undermined, if egalitarianism involves treating individuals in that way.

One might wonder why Cohen believes that individuals need do more than conform to egalitarian rules under rightly ordered conditions of justice. It may be that we cannot achieve a fully equal society with laws and institutions alone. However, I venture that Cohen faces the problem of persisting inequality in particular because of the limitations of his conception of justice. Recall that Cohen's principles of justice bar the remedy of inequalities that are the outcome of individual choices or gambles. Community must therefore step in where justice fails, enlisting individuals' efforts in light of the egalitarian social ethos. This compartmentalized approach seems a poor model for socialism; even the most cash-strapped systems of socialized medicine in capitalist democracies do not attach conditions of prudence for the distribution of health care.[93] Moreover, the approach is likely to backfire: charitable gift-giving is arguably much easier to motivate in cases of disadvantage accruing from brute bad luck—consider, for example, the outpouring of philanthropy after the 2004 tsunami—than it is in cases where people are badly off because of poor choices that do not meet the criteria for state amelioration.

[89] Such as those discussed in Joseph Carens, "The Egalitarian Ethos as a Social Mechanism," in *Distributive Justice*, ed. Kaufman, 50–78.

[90] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 219–22.

[91] Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism For and Against* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 116–17.

[92] Kok-Chor Tan makes this objection, though without drawing my conclusions about equality's relation to human well-being, in Kok-Chor Tan, "Justice and Personal Pursuits," *The Journal of Philosophy* 101, no. 7 (2004): 331–62. See also Kok-Chor Tan, *Justice, Institutions, and Luck* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 53, 19–49.

[93] I will not tackle further the problems of luck egalitarianism here; note, however, that my human flourishing approach eschews the distinction between option and brute luck as a criterion for the remedy of disadvantage. See Sypnowich, *Equality Renewed*, 47–50.

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The appeal of egalitarian political and legal institutions, in contrast to voluntary contributions, is in part that the ethical parameters of personal decisions are clearly marked out. It is because included among our personal commitments are the principles of the egalitarian society in which we live, that we care about social arrangements that best realize equality. Citizens share an ethos, but it is one where the aim of equal human well-being seeks, among other things, to avoid the inadequacies of individualized remedies for social justice and the debilitating effects of constant soul-searching. The well-being model enables us to see that it is for the sake of equality that we give individuals space to pursue their projects and nurture important other persons because it is well-being that we are seeking to improve when we try to make people more equal. In this holistic understanding of human flourishing, relations to family and friends, rewarding hobbies and pursuits, and the aspiration for fulfilling and meaningful work are important interests that inform our understanding of the project of making the enjoyment of well-being more equal.

Should I go to a public meeting or spend time with my children? Barring draconian measures that regulate and coerce people's participation, such a question will of course persist in an egalitarian, socialist society. Value pluralism, essential to any adequate conception of well-being, admits of dilemmas and (perhaps modestly) tragic choices, where some good must be lost to attain some other good. Nonetheless, such conflicts illuminate the importance of designing society's institutions to secure, as much as possible, equality in people's material positions, for it is in an unequal society where these motivational conflicts are so acute. Well-being is not served by saddling individuals with impossible choices about the people and pursuits they love versus their political ideals. The burden of a nagging unease should be lifted from individual egalitarians for two reasons. First, institutions are much less ad hoc and contingent in their provision than are individual gestures. Second, it can be onerous to be beset with difficult personal choices at every turn.

The equal society should be structured so that it is social institutions, not voluntary donations or individual displays of conscience, that ensure the well-being of citizens. Family-relationship goods, for example, are constitutive of human flourishing and, as such, require an egalitarian social context where activities shared by parents with their children are to be encouraged and fostered, not rationed and overridden. Thus, although there is no cognitive division of labor when it comes to one's own well-being and distributive questions, the citizen needs social structures in place that make it possible for the equality commitment to be assured so that other commitments can be pursued with purpose and vigor.

Nagel contends that our self-interest would inevitably undermine our ideals as citizens, and thus an efficacious commitment to ambitious egalitarian institutions would likely always elude us. However, as one

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commentator puts it, this view "significantly under-describes our social nature"[94] and too quickly gives up on the possibility of realizing the egalitarian ideal. Contrary to Nagel's supposition of a divide between the partial and impartial selves, where the partial self thwarts the ambitions of the impartial and thus the hope for equality, I propose that the demands of equality involve institutions so that we may know that our egalitarian commitments are well served, and thus we may enjoy other sources of our well-being that inform why equality is an ideal.

This is not altruism at the ballot box and selfishness in the market, as James Meade proposes; people should not, as Cohen worries, "shun" justice in their daily lives.[95] If we treat equality as a pattern of holdings for which the individual has responsibility only when, as it were, wearing his or her "citizen hat," as Nagel suggests, we have a system of equality presented as an alien intrusion on one's ideals and values, poorly grounded and precarious. Because equality is constitutive of personal well-being, it would do violence to one's integrity and attachments if we were treated as mere vehicles for equality maximization and if equality were treated as alien to personal fulfillment.

VIII. Conclusion

Cohen provides a powerful case against the idea that a society's pursuit of equality is consistent with individuals acting in their personal lives in ways at odds with the egalitarian principles they purport to endorse. I contend, however, that Cohen's narrow understanding of the demands of justice means that he risks putting an excessive load on individuals to make up for the shortfall in institutions, pitting the value of egalitarian community against the well-being of egalitarians. I concur that if we are egalitarians, we should connect with the plight of the disadvantaged in our unjust societies and discharge a personal obligation to remedy disparities in well-being. This means attuning ourselves to the needs of others to further our egalitarian ideals; in so doing, we enrich our egalitarian sensibilities, develop our characters, and thereby improve our own well-being. At the same time, our dedication to equality can be burdensome, marring our ability to pursue the projects and relationships that matter to us and impairing our ability to live well. This burden is a modest but telling manifestation of the wrongs of an unequal society.

This essay proposes that the "demands of equality" are best understood in terms of human flourishing, which we should try to render more equal in our egalitarian philosophies and practices. For egalitarians, the demands of equality are thus threefold. First, we should assume a personal responsibility to contribute to the remedy of shortfalls in flourishing in the unequal

[94] Alan Thomas, *Thomas Nagel: Philosophy Now* (London: Routledge, 2009), 226–29.
[95] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 173–74.

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societies in which we live. Second, our own flourishing involves cultivating an egalitarian sensibility that is mindful of the flourishing of others. Third, egalitarian institutions should be designed to produce a socialist society that can ensure that human flourishing is not impaired by a relentless burden of egalitarian duty. In sum, the problem of the demands of equality reminds us of the imperative to develop an egalitarian outlook to work toward a thoroughgoing institutional response to the challenge of unequal well-being, so that we may live together in a community that fully realizes the egalitarian ideals we treasure.

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