

G. A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*  
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## A REVOLUTION IN MORALS?

The evolution of Cohen's political position has taken a turn that will seem to many to be, quite literally, mystifying. *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* is, in part, a defence of religion and religious morality, and the provocative title asks all on the Left to examine their individual moral views. The book is based on a set of lectures delivered in Edinburgh, established by a Lord Gifford in 1886 for promoting and advancing the knowledge of God. Cohen's broad view of his remit results in a text that begins with personal memoir, provides an interpretation and criticism of scientific socialism and an egalitarian critique of Rawlsian liberalism, and concludes with a 'thought for the day' for rich egalitarians (a quote from Mark's Gospel).

Cohen's politicized, working-class family home is sketched in contrast to the strong religious affinities—and divisions—that characterized his school and home town, Montreal. A divided society, in its turn, leaves Cohen's intellectual views and emotional attachments at variance. A leftist Jewish primary school taught the young Marxist about his religious heritage, including a 'History of the Class Struggle' in Yiddish, before it was disbanded in McCarthyite manner in 1952. At his Protestant secondary school, the majority Jewish intake made Cohen feel that he had to conceal both his lack of a *bar mitzvah* and his political views. Press-ganged into a prayer group at summer camp, he then had to hide an enjoyment of bible-reading—the rebellion of a revolutionary—from his antireligious family. The final fault-line between heart and mind was Cohen's view of Israel, his initial anti-Zionism swayed by singing the Israeli national anthem and, later, the Six Day War, to settle into 'anti-anti-Zionism'—intellectually dismayed by, but feeling emotionally responsible for, Israeli policy in the occupied territories.

The tales of Cohen's childhood are set in the context of a discussion about nurtured beliefs, with Cohen proposing that it is irrational to continue to hold such beliefs once it is realized that a different upbringing would have instilled rival ones. The first exhibit is Cohen's Marxist heritage, but in order to generalize beyond the political and religious he cites his views, nurtured during an Oxford degree, about the distinction between analytic and synthetic truths. Proposing irrationality seems rather strained, for few are prepared to view their beliefs as irrational on the grounds that an as-yet-unheard case might be just as strong: to do so would be rather like listening to those politicians who speak on behalf of the 'silent majority'. Cohen, it would seem, intends to invoke the power of nurtured belief and its hold over our life and actions. Moral and religious beliefs, both in the family and across society, constitute a structure that forms opinions, influences subsequent actions and constrains our future choices.

Cohen's political views were initially defined by his relation to Marxism, culminating in his involvement with the 'Analytical Marxists', who sought to reformulate Marx's work within the parameters dictated by analytic philosophy. The case against Marx in these lectures continues a familiar theme from that work: isolating and criticizing the Hegelian legacy in Marxist theory. The defender of Karl Marx's theory of history has now become a critic, and the first target in these lectures is what Cohen has called the 'obstetric motif' in Marxism—the claim that the solution to the contradictions of capitalism is to be found within capitalism; that the route to communism, and its main features, can be detected within the current order; and that any potential socialist transformation can usefully be described as the old order 'giving birth' to the new.

The critique of Hegel therefore focuses on the proposition that a solution is only available when a problem is fully developed, and that this solution is endogenous to the fully formed problem. Applied to society, this aspect of the dialectical method results in the view that any political solution is necessarily endogenous: any blueprints for socialism, or ideals upon which to found it, that are applied from 'without' cannot be part of a real transformation. Cohen argues that the obstetric motif has encouraged a 'criminal inattention' to the problems of developing a socialist conception of justice and envisaging the structure of a socialist state, both being necessitated by people's reasonable adherence to 'the devil they know'. It is conceded that politically viable normative structures are inevitably related to the current social and economic conditions—what is right must be possible—but that does not rule out a role for a conception of justice, or of a wider morality, in bringing about political change.

Cohen argues that a strong moral case provided the implicit basis for the traditional critique of capitalism, and was a vital element in the political success of socialist movements. This was founded upon the fact that the proletariat was perceived to combine four distinct features: being the majority of society; producing the wealth of society; being the exploited in society; and being the

needy people in society. A wide variety of existing moral viewpoints—democratic views, the right to the product of one’s labour, and humanitarian concern—would therefore be politically inclined to support Marxism. The evolution of capitalism has ensured that these features have now come apart: the working class in the West is much better off, and the most needy are those unable to work. The result is to undermine the view that socialist revolution is inevitable in two respects. Firstly, there is no prospect of a unified working class having a direct interest in socialist transformation—due to exploitation and need—and being able to carry it out. Secondly, any case for socialism that wishes to combine the same range of moral viewpoints now has its work cut out, for they are more widely seen to conflict. It is worth noting that Marx directly addressed the conflict between distribution according to need and the right to the product of your labour in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*: Cohen dismisses this discussion on the grounds that the solution proposed was not chosen from a ‘menu of policy options’.

In reply to those who hold that the four features cohere at the international level, Cohen asserts that the working class ‘do not form a majority within or across the societies in question’. This is due to the disaggregation of the Western working class into distinct and relatively well-off groups, the continuing agrarian majority in the developing world, and the ability of transnational capital to absorb and expel sets of workers at will. The international cooperation of labour is not an option: there are too many cultural barriers for labour to organize effectively at this level. Worse still, for the socialist hope of material equality, is the environmental crisis. Aggregate consumption will have to be reduced, and we therefore need a political morality which presumes that conditions of scarcity will persist for the foreseeable future.

As an assessment of the political state of the working class, Cohen’s views hold out no prospect of socialist revolution—if they are true, then so much the worse for the historical inevitability of communism. The critique is a *fait accompli*: if we think that conditions of scarcity necessitate class conflict, we must expect there to be class conflict for the foreseeable future. Liberal theory, unlike Marxism, has always operated under the assumption that there will not be enough of society’s goods to go around: it is discussion of the fair distribution of scarce goods, in part, that gives rise to a conception of political justice. Having disposed of working-class revolution and any hope of material abundance it is natural, therefore, for Cohen to turn to the work of John Rawls. The result is an egalitarian critique of Rawlsian liberalism, and the agenda is set in the following passage:

My own fundamental concern is neither the basic structure of society, in any sense, nor people’s individual choices, but the pattern of benefits and burdens in society—that is neither a structure within which choice occurs nor a set of choices, but the upshot of structure and choices alike . . . My root belief is that there is

injustice in distribution when inequality of goods reflects not such things as differences in the arduousness of people's labours, or people's different preferences and choices with respect to income and leisure, but myriad forms of lucky and unlucky circumstance.

The phrase 'benefits and burdens' is ambiguous, suggesting social as well as material goods, but it retains a clear focus on equality of outcome, rather than equality of opportunity, power or human development. Cohen does not rule out all inequalities here, but proposes that inequality can be justified only if it is the result of choices for which the individual affected can reasonably be held to be responsible—with the grounds for responsibility being individual choice, as opposed to inherited circumstance. It becomes clear that if nurtured beliefs are a constraint, then we will need to turn our attention to their distributive effect.

Cohen's reference to the 'basic structure of society', quoted above, marks out his disagreement with Rawls. For Rawls, that structure—consisting of the main constitutional, legal and social institutions—is to be designed to ensure that citizens are of equal political status, with each being accorded the most extensive set of basic liberties consistent with allowing the same liberties to all. The distribution of all other social goods is to be determined by the 'difference principle': inequality is justified only to the extent that it benefits the worst off in society. Rawls recognizes that inequality can be socially divisive, but argues that the worst off will be able to retain their dignity in the knowledge that this is the best deal available. Partly for this reason, and partly to ensure stability over time, Rawls requires that these principles of justice be known and upheld by citizens during their daily life.

Cohen's case against Rawls is intended to establish that systematic, and unjust, inequalities could occur within a liberal constitutional framework. If we are to accept Rawls's description of the principles of justice, then they should also be applied to people's choices within the legal framework proposed. Two major illustrations are offered in support of this case: inequality in salary levels and the division of labour between the sexes. With regard to the first, Cohen poses a question to those commanding a high salary: 'Why, in the light of their own belief in the difference principle, do they require more pay than the untalented get for work which is not specially unpleasant?' If they believe that inequalities are only just when they benefit the worst off in society, then their labour-market behaviour cannot be just: the extra salary could go directly towards helping the poor.

Rawls's position is that political justice is concerned only with the basic structure of society, and not the choices within it. Cohen's other example, the just division of labour within the family, is intended to highlight a potential ambiguity in the Rawlsian structure—does it include social institutions such as the family? The family is partly constituted by people's choices, and its structure is an effect of those choices over time: should those choices be a concern of

political justice? The dilemma that Cohen wishes to force upon Rawls is as follows: if we restrict the basic structure to the coercive institutions, then that structure, and the resulting conception of justice, is artificially and indefensibly narrow; but if we extend it to include social institutions such as the family, then we cannot exclude chosen behaviour from the primary purview of justice.

In his recent reworking of 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited', Rawls explicitly states that 'the family is part of the basic structure'. However, with the family, as with voluntary associations, the principles of political justice do not apply directly to its internal life. Rawls holds that equal civil rights for women can be enshrined in law and enforced, but that free choices within the family are not a matter of political justice—which 'allows in principle that considerable gendered division of labour may persist'. This puts Rawls onto the first horn of the dilemma: that the basic structure, so conceived, is arbitrarily narrow. Many would agree with Cohen that the work of the feminist movement, extending equality from civil rights to the workplace and the home, is a political project motivated by a conception of justice.

Cohen's final application of the feminist slogan, 'the personal is political', is a discussion of rich egalitarian professors, and their individual morality. Should they donate their salary to help the needy, and will it change society if they do? The question is, disappointingly, left unanswered, but it is woven in with a revealing discussion of the philosophical problem of *akrasia*. This can be summed up as: can you intentionally do what you think it wrong to do? Hare argued that if you really hold a moral belief, then you will act accordingly—if you don't, it is clear that you didn't really hold the requisite belief. Cohen differs: by implication, egalitarian professors all too often hold on to their riches, even though they regard inequality as unjust. We have the freedom, then, to act in a way that does not accord with our moral views.

In my view this fatally damages Cohen's case against Rawls. Rawls admits that different conceptions of justice can apply to the family, and other voluntary associations, but he restricts his own to the coercive institutions on the basis that these represent a special case: society as a whole is a closed system, and we cannot escape its basic political, economic and social arrangements. Although Cohen has argued that our choices are constrained by complex sociological and psychological factors, his final analysis concedes our freedom to act in a way contrary to our received morality and the moral views of those around us. This allows Rawls to justify his strong distinction between the basic structure and our choices within it. Cohen's own view of individual choice and responsibility, as a ground for just distribution, is sufficiently liberal to ensure that his case against Rawls will fail on its own terms.

The motive for Cohen's focus on individual morality rather than social structure remains puzzling. It appears that Cohen's views, particularly concerning the political impotence of the working class, have led him to conclude that politi-

cal change will only occur when the social pressure for an egalitarian society draws on comprehensive moral and religious doctrines. It is through the cumulative effect of personal actions and choice, the microstructure of society, that we will come to demand, and uphold, just political institutions. Whether religious beliefs are true is not the question: the realm of political discourse can act as a broker, and egalitarian religion would not be an opiate but a stimulant. Cohen's support of—supposedly, widely held—religious morality is therefore instrumental: it offers a possible lever for change. This would seem to ignore one feature of religion that Cohen's engaging memoirs managed to highlight: the incompatibility of such doctrines across most societies. It is because the religious view of a better society is so far divorced from our current arrangements that the doctrines vary so widely—they are utopian visions, and fail to take into account the salient features of contemporary life.

This is not to deny that Cohen documents a real phenomenon—the distributive effect of people's actions within the legal framework—but this is the result of collectively held moral views. Looking for a remedy via individual moral transformation is to misunderstand the problem. There are two dimensions that Cohen appears to ignore: the effect of our basic economic and social arrangements on our collective morality, and an analysis of effective historical agency. Asking high earners to give to charity will have limited effect while our economy is designed to encourage inequality of this kind. Those who have economic power will tend, on the whole, to wield it; high earners will feel that they deserve their salaries, whether or not they can be held responsible for the talents they exercise. Addressing this requires exactly the structural focus that Cohen eschews. There is a valuable role for conceptions of justice that challenge the capitalist notion, but Cohen obscures our view of the correct territory for this.

A stable egalitarian society requires a redistribution of economic and social power, and the 'revolution in morals' proposed by Cohen is both unlikely and insufficient. Unlikely, because historical change has rarely been the result of individual conversions, and Cohen's chosen example of the feminist movement works against him. The gains made in this field have been the result of collective struggle by the women in whose interest these changes are, rather than individual moral transformations in the hearts of men. Insufficient, because redistribution by single charitable acts need not affect the distribution of power: Cohen's egalitarianism focuses on outcome, and consumption, at the expense of a proper analysis of the full range of social goods. If all that matters is the amount of money in my pocket, then getting a charitable handout rather than a salary will suffice. Those of us who also value self-respect, integrity and the opportunity to engage in meaningful work will have to look for a route very different from that now offered by Cohen.