

INTRODUCTION

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G. A. Cohen has an amazing and richly rewarding body of work behind him already. As an interpreter of socialist, and especially Marxist, ideas into the vernacular of contemporary analytic political philosophy he is second to none. As a critic of mainstream theoretical liberalism he has been a welcome voice, urging us to consider the importance of solidarity, of the significance of social justice to our personal choices, as well as the simple and ancient thought that justice is (in some way) equality first and foremost – on this view, anything else said about justice is either finesse or compromise. Whether or not they share his views on all these points, liberal egalitarians cannot afford to ignore them. Among his many topics, one of Cohen's most sustained targets is the work of John Rawls: a thinker whose reflections on justice start with a concern for the fair treatment of people who are considered as equals, yet who ends by endorsing inequalities – albeit only if this makes everyone better off.¹ Surely, Cohen encourages us to think, if no other mistake has been made, Rawls must at least have changed the subject. Justice can't suborn inequality, can it?

In his new book, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*,² G. A. Cohen pays Rawls an enormous compliment. And not just in the section he entitles 'The Greatness of John Rawls', where Cohen goes so far as to suggest that, in all the history of Western political philosophy, only two books might be said to be greater than Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (those two being Plato's *Republic* and Hobbes's *Leviathan*; mighty company indeed). In fact, the whole of Cohen's book, and much of Cohen's earlier work, is a form of compliment to Rawls. Cohen has been one of the most valuable and persistent critics of the Rawlsian project, and he has been so not as someone who denies Rawls's achievements, but as someone who recognises what

¹ Although it is, of course, making the worst off better off which is singled out in the statement of Rawls's difference principle.

² G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

many of us find so attractive and so compelling in this fairness-based, left-leaning vision of liberalism. While the state is seen as a framework in which to live out our different life-choices, Rawls sees our political relationships not as limited to the pursuit of our separate and several self-interests, but as also conditioned by a concern and respect for all who attempt to pursue happiness within the limits of a due concern for others. Moreover, we want to lead our lives in a society of equals and not indifferent to the disadvantages of others. We want to be reasonable, to be just. Without this sense of the appeal of Rawls's aims, Cohen would not be so insightful and – in the best, positive way – provocative a critic as he is.

What he shares with Rawls is a concern with equality and a fairer society. He is also minded to agree, albeit for his own reasons, that there are limits to how involved we want the state to get in our everyday lives. Perhaps as importantly (and in distinction from most conservative critics), Cohen shares something of the theoretical ambitions of much of liberalism. By reflecting on our ideals, it is to be hoped we can form true opinions about how we should be living – however far that may be from our current practices. This needn't imply utopianism, but just a healthy sense that, whatever justice is, we may be at some considerable remove yet from living justly (and, with Cohen's approach, perhaps even at some remove from being able to live justly). When Cohen makes a plea for solidarity and for justice to be seen as personal, guiding our individual life choices as well as the regulation of our political institutions, he does so as, in key ways, almost a fellow traveller (although the shared journey in this case is that of left-wing political theory rather than Marxism).

Fellow traveller or no, Cohen has serious disagreements with the Rawlsian project. Much of Cohen's value as a critic of Rawls however, depends less on his respect for his target than the precise distance and direction in which he stands from it. Cohen is not a liberal. Not that he is illiberal, by any means. But he approaches liberalism very much from the left, and is moved principally by variations on socialist (and socialist anarchist) ideas and concerns. Two of his major disagreements with liberalism are summarised in the very title of the book that forms the focus of this collection. Cohen wants to rescue justice and equality from the Rawlsian project. In regards to equality, Cohen thinks that Rawls starts from a set of assumptions that tell in favour of understanding justice as equality but then, illicitly, smuggles in other

concerns that lead him to conclude that justice requires something rather different. In particular, Cohen charges that Rawls's version of the difference principle – which permits inequalities that favour the worst off – permits too much inequality and for the wrong, non-justice related, reasons. Thus, in aiming to rescue equality, Cohen wants to argue that Rawls should have preferred something more wholeheartedly egalitarian. In particular, if justice directs us to make the worst off as well off as possible, why stop until no-one has more than the worst off (who are now also the equal best off along with everyone else)?

Also to be rescued is the concept of justice itself – or, as we might say, the purity of the concept of justice, untrammelled and uncompromised by concerns (moral or otherwise) that properly belong under a different heading. Rawls's constructivist process aims to explain what is just in terms of a range of concerns, including practicalities and other matters of (non-value) fact. For Rawls, it counts against a theory of justice that it is practically unachievable. Cohen, by contrast, aims to show that the question of justice is separate from practical, factual questions. Practicality is affected by a range of considerations, not least amongst which are psychological, motivational factors. We might ask ourselves what, given our psychological tendencies, is just for us; but on Cohen's view we will find that we can answer this (if we can) only because of a prior commitment to what is just independent of these facts – since there must be some principle marking out the justice-related significance of these psychological tendencies. If psychology affects what is just, it is only because justice first comments on psychology. Fundamentally, justice is not conditioned by facts; and for this reason Rawls was never really offering a theory of *justice* at all. If, for reasons of practicality, or of stability, or of efficiency, we settle for the Rawlsian state, we may well be settling for something both different to and less than a perfectly just society.

Cohen's book is densely argued, with much Rawlsian exegesis that is as carefully considered as it is inventively inspired. The brief summary here of Cohen's concerns is only a hint at the complexity and appeal of his critique. This collection of essays is in large part an attempt to pay to Cohen something of the compliment he has paid to so many others, and to Rawls especially. That is, the compliment of carefully argued disagreement. These responses are not exclusively Rawlsian, but do show an appreciation of the significance of Rawls's work, as well as of Cohen's deeply thought

criticisms of it. In the essays by Arneson, Christiano and Braynen, and Lippert-Rasmussen, Cohen is challenged on his position about the intimate relationship between justice and equality. Arneson denies that Rawls makes an illicit move away from an initial commitment to equality, while Lippert-Rasmussen deftly explores the space left for justified incentives on both Rawls's and Cohen's views. Christiano and Braynen even offer something of a synthesis between Cohen and Rawls, one which holds that equality is required by justice, but claims that some inequalities – those which offer superior benefits to the worst off – are less unjust than others, and even less unjust than some equal distributions. Otsuka seeks to provide a better explanation of why we don't want the state to have too much detailed control over our individual life-choices, one which is centred on self-ownership rather than Cohen's concern with invasiveness. Pogge criticises Cohen's understanding of fundamental moral principles, including justice, as being fact-insensitive. He aims to clarify what Cohen has in mind while arguing that Cohen fails to argue successfully against all relevant rival views. Lastly, Williams attempts to defuse some of Cohen's criticisms of Rawls's constructivism, particularly Rawls's crucial restriction of his difference principle to the basic structure of society rather than to our more personal economic decisions.

G. A. Cohen has inspired so many of us with his sense of the great importance of even abstract questions of justice, his dedication to rigorous critical analysis and his love of carefully laid out, logical argumentation. No less has he inspired us with the sheer pleasure he takes in what, in his hands, becomes a far from dry and impersonal subject matter. It is a great pleasure and privilege to be connected with this collection of essays on Cohen's latest book, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, a book with which he makes a major contribution both to Rawlsian scholarship and to political and moral philosophy quite generally.