



On G. A. Cohen's "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice"

Author(s): Ingrid Robeyns

Source: *Ethics*, Vol. 125, No. 4 (July 2015), pp. 1132-1135

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/680879>

Accessed: 10/09/2015 09:09

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Ethics*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

On G. A. Cohen's "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice"*

Ingrid Robeyns

In his 1979 Tanner lecture, Amartya Sen asked the famous "Equality of what?" question.¹ Historically, utilitarians favored the maximization of "utility," which John Rawls and Sen both rejected. For Rawls, the answer was "social primary goods." Ronald Dworkin favored a specific account of resources, which combined both internal as well as external resources.² Sen suggested "basic capabilities" as the right answer—"a person being able to do certain basic things."³

Twenty-five years ago, G. A. Cohen published in this journal "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice." This has become a hugely influential article, quickly acquiring the status of a canonical paper in the philosophical literature on distributive justice. The two main topics that Cohen addressed have both led to flourishing literatures. First, there is the literature on how to decide when a claim of injustice is justified and what, if any, weight is attached to personal responsibility in that process. In political philosophy the work of Cohen, Dworkin, Richard Arneson, and others gave rise to a family of egalitarian theories that became known under the label *luck egalitarianism*; in adjacent disciplines such as welfare economics, the term *responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism* is more commonly used. The second major literature where "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice" became influential is the question on the metric of distributive justice: should that metric be Rawlsian social pri-

* A retrospective essay on G. A. Cohen, "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," *Ethics* 99 (1989): 906–44. All references to page numbers are to this article, unless otherwise noted. I wish to thank Rutger Claassen, Sem de Maagt, Mike Otsuka, and Roland Pierik for helpful comments on a previous version of this essay.

1. Amartya Sen, "Equality of What?" in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 1, ed. Sterling McMurrin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 196–220.

2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Ronald Dworkin, "What Is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981): 283–345.

3. Sen, "Equality of What?," 218.

Ethics 125 (July 2015): 1132–1135

© 2015 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0014-1704/2015/12504-0013\$10.00

mary goods, Dworkinian resources, capabilities, welfare, or something else?

Cohen reviewed and analyzed several influential answers to the "equality of what" question. In particular, he analyzed Rawls's and Dworkin's rejection of equality of welfare and provided strong arguments against a singular focus on equality of resources. Cohen also advanced his own answer to the "equality of what" question, which he called "access to advantage." He suggested that egalitarianism requires us "to eliminate *involuntary disadvantage*," by which he meant "disadvantage for which the sufferer cannot be held responsible, since it does not appropriately reflect choices that he has made or is making or would make" (916).

Most of the article was devoted to teasing out the exact cut for when one could be held responsible for a disadvantage, but Cohen also advanced some novel claims about the metric of distributive justice. He rejected Dworkinian equality of resources since that account radically rejects welfare as the metric of justice and hence does not permit us to recognize the claim for societal support (e.g., for very expensive pain killers) by someone who is able to move but only by being in deep pain when doing so. Cohen rightly argued that egalitarian justice had to go beyond resources and include some elements of welfare. Cohen endorsed "equal access to advantage" as the metric of distributive justice, whereby advantage had to be understood as a "broader notion than welfare" (916).

Unfortunately, the exact content of the idea of "advantage" did not become clear. Cohen claimed not to be able to say "in a pleasingly systematic way, exactly what should count as an advantage, partly because I have not thought hard enough about this question, which is surely one of the deepest in normative philosophy" (920). Cohen also worried about "the unlovely heterogeneity of the components of the vector of advantage" (921). Perhaps Cohen could have taken consolation in his own methodological commitment that if philosophical analysis brings us into tricky terrain (such as metaphysical questions related to free will and determinism, or problems of incommensurability in dimensions of well-being or advantage), that "this is just tough luck. It is not a reason for not following the argument where it goes" (934). Hence one could argue that if the most plausible metric of justice is a multidimensional and heterogeneous metric, which causes us headaches when trying to make interpersonal comparisons of advantage—then so be it. Simplicity is irrelevant if we want to know the truth about justice.

The influence of Cohen's article is reflected in the success of luck-egalitarianism, which is a widely endorsed—perhaps at this particular moment *the* most widely endorsed—egalitarian theory. Yet luck-egalitarianism has also been subjected to forceful critiques. In a full-blown attack, Elizabeth Anderson argued that egalitarianism should not focus on *distributive* issues but rather on understanding people as standing in a relation

of equals.⁴ Anderson introduced the term “luck-egalitarianism,” and her critique led to an intense debate about the very nature of equality. The alternative, which over time received the label “relational egalitarianism,” has received much attention in recent writings. However, one could argue that it is too early to conclude that luck-egalitarianism and relational egalitarianism are mutually exclusive theories. Perhaps it is possible to construct a coherent and plausible theory that builds a luck-egalitarian account of distributive justice into a broader account of social justice that can meet the ultimate moral concerns of relational egalitarianism.

Some philosophers believe that the debate on the metric of justice has had its best days, and that not much further interesting work can be done. That conclusion would be premature. A first question one could ask is to what extent Cohen’s endorsement of “equal access to advantage,” which he clearly says is neither just resources nor welfare, is ultimately different from Sen’s capability metric. From Cohen’s own brief discussion on capabilities in “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,” as well as from later writings, a picture emerges that Cohen’s notion of “access to advantage” and Sen’s notion of capabilities are much more alike than different.⁵ On the other hand, Cohen advocates equality of access, whereas most capability theories of justice have advocated sufficiency as the distributive rule.⁶ Another striking observation is that in contrast to luck-egalitarianism, there is very little substantive discussion within the capability literature on the question of responsibility. This cries for an analysis of the question of personal responsibility for inequalities of capabilities with the precision that characterizes Cohen’s work and the work of his students.

There is also a set of methodological questions in the “metric of justice” debate that has been underexplored. Different philosophers hold often very different views on a set of methodological commitments, but not all of these commitments are properly acknowledged. This prompts the question to what extent these different egalitarian theories and metrics of justice are comparable given these different methodological commitments. One methodological choice is whether equality may need to be traded off against other values, or rather whether “distributive justice” or “equality” is a value that needs to be fully realized. Another methodological question is the status of questions of implementation. For Cohen, it is “a methodological mistake to mirror the demands of practice at the

4. Elizabeth Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287–337.

5. See also G. A. Cohen, “Equality of What? On Welfare, Goods, and Capabilities,” in *The Quality of Life*, ed. Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 9–29.

6. For example, Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?” and Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

level of fundamental justifying theory."⁷ Yet this is a controversial point: other philosophers believe that one can opt for an action-guiding or "practical" idea of egalitarian justice from the very start of theorizing. And perhaps the metric that is most convincing for one set of methodological commitments need not be the same as the metric that is most convincing for another set of methodological parameters? A careful analysis of these meta-theoretical or methodological differences, and an awareness of these differences among the contributors to the vast literature on social and distributive justice, could further illuminate claims on egalitarian justice.

Cohen's article not only made an important substantive contribution: his way of doing political philosophy, which entailed (among other things) a very careful writing style with great attention to detail and taking the argument where it leads us, has shaped many eminent thinkers in the present generation of political philosophers.⁸ "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice" is not only influential because of the substantive claims Cohen defended. It should also be seen as one brick in a monumental edifice that forms his hugely influential body of work that he bequeathed to subsequent generations of analytically minded political philosophers.

7. G. A. Cohen, "Afterword to Chapters One and Two," in his *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. Michael Otsuka (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 68.

8. See Cohen's essay "How to Do Political Philosophy," chap. 11, in Otsuka, *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*, 225–35.