# IF YOU'RE AN EGALITARIAN … SO WHAT?

By Nigel Pleasants*

Abstract: *G. A. Cohen is justly acclaimed for his penetrating and searching critique of the commanding Rawlsian liberal paradigm in contemporary political philosophy. He is also well known for his fervent advocacy of a radical view of economic equality, namely, that "justice requires (virtually) unqualified equality itself." This essay focuses on two issues at the heart of Cohen's critique, namely, his argument that economic equality is a moral as well as a political responsibility, and his interrogatory question: "If you're an egalitarian, how come you're so rich?" I take up critics' objection that Cohen's arguments for what economic egalitarianism requires are overly morally demanding. I also present a puzzle about the critical reception of Cohen's work: Given the amount and quality of engagement with his arguments on what egalitarianism would look like in a future just society, how come there's been such scant attention to his reflections on the predicament of the "rich egalitarian" in current-day unjust society? The essay culminates in a tentative answer to this question.*

KEY WORDS: G. A. Cohen, egalitarianism, rich egalitarianism, economic inequality, justice

## I. Introduction

Nearly everyone, or at least every reasonable person, today endorses a view of what egalitarianism requires that around a hundred years ago would have been dismissed as absurd and untenable. This is the view that all human beings are of equal moral worth. However, there is one form of egalitarianism that continues to be endorsed and advocated only by a radical few: *economic* egalitarianism. One of the most radical of the radical few is the sorely missed brilliant political philosopher G. A. Cohen. Cohen is justly acclaimed for his penetrating and searching critique of the commanding Rawlsian liberal paradigm in contemporary political philosophy. He is also well known for his fervent advocacy of a radical view of economic

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equality, namely, that "justice requires (virtually) unqualified equality itself."[1]

This essay focuses on two issues at the heart of Cohen's critique, namely, his argument that economic equality is a *moral* as well as a political responsibility, and his interrogatory question: "If you're an egalitarian, how come you're so rich?" I take up critics' objection that Cohen's arguments for what economic egalitarianism requires are overly morally demanding. I also present a puzzle about the critical reception of Cohen's work: Given the amount and quality of engagement with his arguments on what egalitarianism would look like in a future just society, how come there's been such scant attention to his reflections on the predicament of the "rich egalitarian" in current-day unjust society? The essay culminates in a tentative answer to this question.

Section II contextualizes economic equality in relation to egalitarianism in general. Section III examines Cohen's critique of what he calls the "lax" interpretation of John Rawls's difference principle; considers the objection that his "strict" interpretation is overly morally demanding; and draws parallels with the recent work on implicit bias as a barrier to proper implementation of other components of egalitarian justice, namely, gender, sexual, racial, and climate justice. Section IV turns to the problem of the rich egalitarian, examines the paucity of critical response to that probing question, and proffers a tentative explanation by way of the concept of "*alief*."

## II. Egalitarianism and Economic Equality

Egalitarianism is fundamentally about the pursuit and achievement of *equality* for all human beings. Over the last century or so there has been substantial progress toward its achievement and the institutionalization and internalization of equality as the primary moral value and principle of modern society (alongside the other foundational values of freedom, liberty, and rights). The upsurge of philosophical writing on moral progress in recent years is testament to this progression. In this writing there is broad consensus that there has been substantial moral progress on the recognition, and partial realization, of the basic moral truth that all human beings are of equal moral worth, regardless of their gender, sexual, and racial classification and identification, and must be treated accordingly.[2] All the same, most writers on moral progress readily acknowledge that moral equality with regard to gender, sexual, and racial classification has not yet been achieved and that there remains much to do to root out sexism, racism, and

[1] G. A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 124 (Cohen's footnote omitted).

[2] See, for example, Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell, "The Limits of Evolutionary Explanations of Morality and Their Implications for Moral Progress," *Ethics* 126, no. 1 (2015): 37–67; Michael Huemer, "A Liberal Realist Answer to Debunking Skeptics: The Empirical Case for Realism," *Philosophical Studies* 173, no. 7 (2016): 1983–2010; Jeroen Hopster, "Explaining Historical Moral Convergence: The Empirical Case against Realist Intuitionism," *Philosophical Studies* 177, no. 5 (2020): 1255–73.

heterosexism. The wrongness of sexist, racist, and heterosexist practices, behaviors, and attitudes is very widely accepted among the citizenry of modern societies, at least at the level of *explicit* belief and avowal. This has become a centrally established norm to such an extent that even people who are flagrantly sexist, racist, and heterosexist are often motivated to deny that they are and pretend that they are not.[3] Moreover, it is increasingly widely recognized, by philosophers and social scientists and in public discourse, that the sexism, racism, and heterosexism that remains is the product not so much of explicit beliefs and attitudes, but of endemic *implicit bias.* In other words, were it not for implicit bias—which, by its very nature, the subject is unaware of harboring—we would be much closer to full realization of the principle of the equal moral worth and value of all persons regardless of their social or personal identity.

I have set out this picture of egalitarian progress in order to throw into sharp relief the one aspect of people's condition and circumstances on which there has been *no* egalitarian progress: *economic* inequality. Although it is true that in modern societies the poorest are considerably better off than the poorest were in pre-modern and early industrializing societies, the *gap* between richest and poorest in modern societies is arguably greater than ever.[4] There is very wide consensus on equality of *opportunity* as a fundamental moral value (though much disagreement on what it consists in and how it should be pursued and secured). Yet the widespread strength of belief in the moral rightness of equality of opportunity is matched by that of belief in the moral permissibility or rightness of *inequality* of economic *outcome.*

There is, of course, much critical discussion in Rawlsian-dominated political philosophy of the kind, degree, and range of economic inequality that is justifiable in a *just* society. But there is very little support for the full force of Cohen's radical claim that "justice requires (virtually) unqualified equality itself." Socialists and Marxists patently are committed to essentially this view of the moral and political value of "unqualified equality itself," but there are few of them and they have minimal presence and influence in contemporary political philosophy, and even less outside of academia.

Cohen's writings stand out as a radical challenge to the limited economic egalitarianism (as he sees it) of contemporary political philosophy. In his post-Marxist phase, he has developed powerful, penetrating, and troublesome arguments that operate squarely within the paradigm of liberal,

[3] For example, Justin Khoo points out that "there are significant social, political, and economic costs to being perceived as racist. As such, people do not want to be thought of, and resent being called, racist—indeed, they do not even want to think of themselves as racist." Justin Khoo, "Code Words in Political Discourse," *Philosophical Topics* 45, no. 2 (2017): 38.

[4] Thomas Piketty, a prominent social scientist on the pattern and history of inequality, says: "socioeconomic inequality has increased in all regions of the world since the 1980s" and "has come at the expense of the bottom 50 percent of the distribution, whose share of total income stood at about 20–25 percent in 1980 in all five regions but had fallen to 15–20 percent in 2018." Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 1, 21.

egalitarian political philosophy. This stance is wonderfully embodied in the title to his Gifford lectures: *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*[5] As noted by Thomas Nagel,[6] the question posed by Cohen's title is cunningly directed both at Rawlsian ideal-theory egalitarianism of the yet-to-be-realized fully just society and the practical egalitarianism of ideal-theory egalitarians living in nonideal, liberal society as it presently is. Cohen's challenge to egalitarian political philosophers operates at both the theoretical level (What *would* egalitarianism require of egalitarians in a fully just society?) and the practical level (What *does* egalitarianism require of egalitarians in our present, unjust society?).

## III. Cohen's "Strict" Interpretation of the Difference Principle

The substance of Cohen's critique of Rawlsian economic egalitarianism is focused on how to interpret the requirements of Rawls's famous "difference principle." This principle stipulates that in a just society economic inequality is justified only to the extent that it benefits the poorest members of that society. The undisputed (even by most Marxists these days) basic facts of economics and sociology show that a market economy is indispensable for reasonable levels of productivity and efficiency in *any* society, whatever its politics and ethics.[7] Given this basic economic truth, the need for incentive-generated inequality seems to follow inexorably, and this is part of the background knowledge that informs the formulation of the difference principle in Rawls's original position. Justice requires that the poorest members of a society are made as well off as they can be, and the "laws" of economics and sociology are such that this pertains when economic incentives (via remuneration opportunities and taxation) are pitched to the point at which they stimulate maximization of productivity and tax revenue, the good effects of which eventually descend to the poorest.

The genius of the difference principle is that everyone seems to win under it. The richest and well-off enjoy the fruits of their high earnings (and, as Cohen puts it, "keepings"[8]), satisfyingly assured that they have done their part in making their society fully just. And the poorest are made as well off as they can be, thanks to the distant effects of the richest's incentive-driven economic activities. Nevertheless, according to Rawls and Rawlsians, the fruits of incentive-generated economic inequality are not justified on the basis that the holder *deserves* them. Rather, the holder is *permitted* to acquire them, not by virtue of personal *right*, but because of the *good consequences* of the incentives for the poorest.[9]

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

[6] Thomas Nagel, "Getting Personal: Why Don't Egalitarians Give Away Their Own Money?" *Times Literary Supplement*, June 23, 2000, 5–6.

[7] See Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), chap. 4.

[8] Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 149.

[9] This is why Cohen insists that the "incentives *justification* for inequality" is a misnomer; it is actually "merely a factual defense," not a "normative justification"; Cohen, *If You're an*

In his central, and much-scrutinized, argument, developed over a number of years in a variety of fora, Cohen accepts the difference principle,[10] but disputes Rawls's and Rawlsians' interpretation of what it licenses for a just society. Cohen dubs theirs the "lax" interpretation and his own the "strict" interpretation. The crux of his critique is that a society in which the poorest are as well off as they can be only by dint of the richest being incentivized by high economic rewards to work assiduously at their wealth-generating activities cannot be deemed a just one. A society in which earnings potential and taxation have been set to the point at which the poorest are better off than they would be under employment and income rules in which earnings potential is set at a lower level for the richest, realizes the difference principle and is economically just, according to the Rawlsian "lax" interpretation. Call this "'*just*' society." However, if we interrogate this "*just*" society further, we will see, Cohen urges, that the difference principle is *not* implemented in it according to either the letter or spirit of the principle. How can this be, given that ex hypothesi "*just*" society has an economic structure wherein the rules for higher earning and taxation are set so as to make the poorest as well off as they can be? Cohen's answer is that in "*just*" society the poorest would be better off still if the richest were to work assiduously and conscientiously at their wealth-generating activities without the need for an economic incentive to motivate them to do so.

In "*just*" society citizens are motivated merely to support *politically* the rightness of the difference principle. That is, they support the principle that economic inequalities are permissible only to the extent that they promote the greatest benefit to the poorest, at whatever level that turns out to be. But on Cohen's "strict" interpretation of the difference principle, citizens of a just society would not only be motivated to support that principle *politically*, they must also be motivated to act in accord with its content. It is therefore not sufficient for the richest and well-off in a just society merely to support the institutionalization of the difference principle. They must also, in Kantian terms, make the content of the difference principle the "maxim" of their economic actions—they must want to do their part in making the poorest as well off as they can be. Cohen's fundamental objection to the Rawlsian "lax" interpretation of the difference principle is that it allows the

*Egalitarian*, 120. However, if the incentives are necessary not because the richest are *unable* to work effectively without them ("a factual defense") but because they're *unwilling* to, the "incentives justification" should perhaps be seen as the "incentives excuse." See Section III.B below for discussion of unwillingness versus inability; and see Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 157–58, for his discussion of the distinction between justification and excuse.

[10] In 1992 (G. A. Cohen, "Incentives, Inequality and Community," *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Volume 13 [Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1992], 270) he even endorsed it and commended it to fellow socialists. Later, he says merely that he does not "question" or "endorse" it in his argument against Rawls's "lax" interpretation, being content to assert that his argument "is consistent with [its] truth" (G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008], 15). However, in a later chapter of this work he finds reasons for rejecting the principle itself; see Section III.B below for discussion.

richest and well-off to alienate their personal agency to the functioning of an impersonal social structure that operationalizes the principle in a way that benefits *themselves* at the expense of the poorest while not having to acknowledge that this is what they're doing.

### *A. The moral demandingness of the "strict" interpretation*

Cohen's "strict" interpretation of what the difference principle requires in a just society has looked unreasonably morally demanding to many critics. This is so both in terms of the "cost" to those citizens with the potential for high earnings, and the difficulty of willfully acting in strict observance of the difference principle. The difficulty comes from what Cohen insists is an inescapably essential feature of the difference principle, namely, that for it to be realized in line with its strict interpretation, it is not sufficient that it be institutionalized in public law and citizens do not violate what its rules prescribe. Citizens also incur a *positive* duty to pursue and promote the content of those rules in their personal choices, actions, and attitudes. This requires that citizens not only support, endorse, vote for, and comply with the laws, rules, and directives that have been instituted to make the poorest as well off as they can be. They must also be guided and motivated by the content of the difference principle in their economic and employment-relevant decisions and actions. Thus, implementation of the political undertaking is a moral responsibility for each citizen.

The political responsibility is not onerous to discharge because it involves only the occasional expression of support for the institutionalization of just principles, rules, and laws, along with continuous observance of the negative duty not to violate them. Because moral responsibility, on the other hand, is a positive duty, it demands much more, though it comes with only an imperfect obligation. This is because one would never be free from the duty, and exactly what it requires on any occasion would be indeterminate and up to the agent to decide, in good faith.[11] Thus, in a just society one, of course, must accept the regime of rules that have been instituted to make the poorest as well off as they can be. But in addition to that, one must be on the lookout for ways in which one's own decisions and actions can promote that end. One must foremostly attend to how much (or rather, how little) salary one is prepared to accept, but also how and where to save, how much to save, what to invest in, how much disposable income to redirect to egalitarian causes, and so forth. Moreover, these, and innumerable other kinds of economic decisions and actions, must be more or less continuously attended to and deliberated upon, both because of the ineliminable indeterminacy of

[11] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 156, expounds the imperfect nature of positive duty thus: "How far it should extend depends, in large part, on what each person's true needs are in view of his sensibilities, and it must be left to each to decide this for himself … the duty has in it a latitude for doing more or less, and no specific limits can be assigned to what should be done."

the moral duty and the dynamic nature of the decision-making environment. One knows that one's circumstances will change, sometimes unexpectedly; one wants to fulfill one's positive duty to contribute to the difference principle's object to a fair, perhaps generous, degree. But one also has, Cohen acknowledges, a personal prerogative and obligations that issue from "special ties" to significant others. So, one doesn't want to, and is not expected to, do *more* to promote what the difference principle aims at than what it requires, strictly interpreted. By the very nature of an imperfect moral duty, there is always more one could do. But how does one draw the line so that it does not encroach on one's personal prerogative and special-tie obligations, but does not fall too short of doing so?

Cohen's stated reason for arguing that authentic realization of the difference principle requires that citizens embrace and pursue what the principle is designed to achieve is that it is very likely technically infeasible to design institutional machinery that will deliver the principle's aim while maintaining economic efficiency. As Cohen puts it, having citizens thus motivated "promotes a distribution more just than what the rules of the economic game by themselves can secure."[12] But it is unclear whether Cohen thinks that it is only when just rules cannot achieve what they aim at on their own that individuals are morally obliged to pursue the content of the rules, or a *moral* requirement that individuals take up in their own actions and choices what the rules are aimed at. Is it a general feature of social justice that individuals should not leave it to institutional structures to do their moral work for them, even if it could be done wholly institutionally, by the society's basic structure? Cohen considers as an "abstract" possibility a "set of rules" that are "so finely tuned" as to perfectly deliver the difference principle.[13] Under this scenario, he agrees that citizens would fully discharge both their political and moral responsibility merely by conforming to the rules, or rather, that there would be no extra moral imperative to do more than what the rules require. While Cohen stresses that this is an "imaginary" scenario, its consideration suggests that he thinks it is *only* the technical infeasibility of institutionalizing the difference principle to the point of fully delivering its content that calls forth the need for individuals to take up the slack in their own choices and actions.

But elsewhere Cohen goes further, insisting that "a society without an ethos in daily life that is informed by a broadly egalitarian principle *for that reason* fails to provide distributive justice," and "justice in personal choice is *necessary* for a society to *qualify* as just."[14] The ambiguity notwithstanding,

[12] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice*, 128.
[13] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice*, 124.
[14] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice*, 2, and *If You're an Egalitarian*, 6 (my emphases). The proposition that achievement of justice cannot be delegated by citizens to state legislation for *moral* reasons (whatever its technical feasibility) is redolent of the idea of "moral expertise," which is considered by most, but not all, philosophers to be oxymoronic. With moral expertise, critics

I think Cohen's considered view is that social justice generally (not just distributive economic justice) places demands and duties on citizens in their capacities both as political and moral agents. This broader view is articulated in the "Prospectus" to his Gifford lectures, where he distinguishes his mature political philosophy from the political "structuralism" of both contemporary liberal egalitarianism and Marxist historical materialism (of which he was previously a distinguished devotee). In essence, his view is that the pursuit of social justice is a collective political undertaking the discharge of which is an inalienable individual moral responsibility.

Cohen's argument that just rules are both a political (and a collective) and a personal moral responsibility has found little favor among his many critics. Most of these continue to uphold what he predicted would be (and sought preemptively to rebut) "the basic structure objection" to his strict interpretation of the difference principle. The core of the objection is that the strict interpretation is excessively morally demanding, and that it inappropriately moralizes and individualizes what is inherently a political task and collective endeavor. However, setting aside whether Cohen is right about what authentic implementation of the difference principle requires, it is interesting to note that something close to his view is now widely acknowledged to apply to other central rules of egalitarian justice in actual (nonideal) society, in particular, to racial, gender, and sexual equality.

### *B. Political responsibility, moral responsibility, and implicit bias*

The prominence of the phenomenon of implicit bias has largely arisen since the publication of Cohen's *Rescuing Justice and Equality* in 2008.[15] The puzzling phenomenon that the concept of implicit bias purports to explain is why there remains so much *structured* racial, sexual, and gender inequality despite rafts of laws formally prohibiting acts of racial, sexual, and gender discrimination, and in the face of widespread, seemingly sincere, explicit endorsement of what those laws aim to achieve. Implicit bias explanation is that the explicit beliefs on racial and sexual equality of many, probably most, citizens are contradicted by their nonconscious beliefs and attitudes, which attribute negative stereotypical features to women, homosexual and trans people, and nonwhite people in general. These negative beliefs and attitudes direct citizens' behaviors (without their awareness) in ways that lead to systematic patterns and structures of discriminatory outcome for groups subjected to the consequences of implicit biases.[16]

charge both that there isn't and can be no such thing, and that even if there were, to defer to it would be a dereliction of one's moral agency. See Sarah McGrath, "Skepticism about Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for Moral Realism," *The Journal of Philosophy* 108, no. 3 (2011): 111–37.

[15] For a perspicuous overview and analysis, see Neil Levy, "Implicit Bias and Moral Responsibility: Probing the Data," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94, no. 1 (2017): 3–26.

[16] Consider just one illustration of the insidious ways in which the phenomenon manifests its effects. A recent study of discourse in English football commentary found that "players with

In a word, then, what the concept of implicit bias shows, in conjunction with overwhelming empirical evidence of continued patterns of systematic inequality, is that racial, sexual, and gender equality requires much more of citizens than their willing endorsement and support of legislation and policies that are designed to achieve that equality.

What we have here looks much like what Cohen objects to in a supposedly just society regulated by the laxly interpreted difference principle. That is, we have citizens who support and endorse just rules of conduct at the political level, but who lack the motivation to *act* in ways that actively pursue what the rules are instituted to achieve. Indeed, their individual actions, while permitted by—or not in direct contravention of—the rules, make sporadic small contributions to the *opposite* of what the rules are designed to achieve, which accumulate into systematic structures of unjust outcome. The upshot of implicit bias explanation is that for racial, sexual, and gender equality laws and policies to be realized, citizens must not only support those laws and policies politically, they must also be morally motivated in their everyday actions to execute the positive duty to actively contribute to the desideratum of racial, sexual, and gender equality. And the positive moral duty turns out to demand much more of citizens than merely refraining from acts of explicit discrimination. Because it is a positive duty, what exactly citizens have to do to fulfill it is indeterminate. But among other things, it requires seeking to change one's attitudes and behaviors in the light of acknowledgment that one is (if one is) the possessor of "white privilege" and a participant in and contributor to "rape culture."[17]

Regardless of whether Cohen is right about there being an inalienable moral responsibility for citizens of a just society to pursue the content of the difference principle, this view of the relation between political and moral responsibility does seem to hold for many other central rules of egalitarian justice (such as racial and gender equality) in our actual, unjust society. I don't think this is a particularly controversial claim, and I conjecture that most of Cohen's critics who uphold the basic structure objection to his moralized account of implementation of the difference principle would not do so for gender and racial justice. But it is not obvious why the basic structure objection holds for economic, but not for other kinds of, social justice. This is especially so, considering that, in the light of what implicit

lighter skin are regularly and overwhelmingly praised for intelligence, work ethic, and quality compared with those with darker skin, who are reduced to physical and athletic attributes"; "Groundbreaking Report Reveals Racial Bias in English Football Commentary," https://www.theguardian.com/football/2020/jun/29/groundbreaking-report-reveals-racial-bias-in-english-football-commentary. As an avid "consumer" of such broadcasts, these findings are especially revelatory to me because I had no inkling of any such biases at play, and I'm sure that the commentators didn't either.

[17] See, for example, Trip Glazer and Nabina Liebow, "Confronting White Ignorance: White Psychology and Rational Self-Regulation," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 52, no. 1 (2020): 50–71, and Larry May and Robert Strikwerda, "Men in Groups: Collective Responsibility for Rape," *Hypatia* 9, no. 2 (1994): 134–51.

bias explanation reveals about the circumstances of gender and racial injustice, rectification of these injustices may be as morally demanding as Cohen's strict interpretation of difference principle realization.[18]

I return to the question of whether Cohen is right about what successful implementation of the difference principle requires, but will not pursue it much further here. This is partly because of the voluminous critical scrutiny it has already received, but more to the point, because I think that it is mired in utopian speculation on how people would be constituted and disposed to act in a social and political environment very different from our own. The latter is the reason why Karl Marx wrote so strikingly little about what post-capitalist society might be like. It follows from historical materialism that there are epistemic limitations, imposed by current economic structures, on what can fruitfully be conceived and thought about social life in post-capitalist society. Yet in Chapter 4 of *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, Cohen himself indulges in what I regard as otiose utopian/dystopian speculation when he finds reason to reject the difference principle itself (not just a "lax" interpretation of it).

The force of Cohen's argument for the unjustness of substantial economic inequalities that arise from incentives in a merely "*just*" society issues from his diagnosis that these incentives are necessary only because the richest *make* them necessary through *unwillingness* to work productively without them. But now, he ponders, what if the incentives (and the resulting inequality) were necessary not because the richest choose to act in ways that make them necessary, but because they *couldn't* work productively without them? That is, what if it is just an immalleable fact of human psychology that people cannot work assiduously at wealth-generating activities without being incentivized to do so by the lure of high economic rewards?[19] *If* this were to be the case, then Cohen concedes that the difference principle is

[18] It also seems very likely that the pursuit of climate justice places a demanding individual moral responsibility, in addition to political and collective responsibility, on all of us.

[19] Cohen is rightly skeptical about this hypothetical possibility, but the following is an actual case of limiting factors on performance that are beyond the agent's willful control. Many professional footballers cannot perform to the peak of their capacity unless they are involved in a competitive game in which the stakes (the symbolic rewards) are high. For such players, even if they sincerely want to perform at their peak capacity in a competitive game on which nothing much turns, they simply won't be able to. For some players this can go the other way, whereby they "choke" (i.e., fail to perform at the level at which they are capable) in the highest stakes matches. Either way, there are limits on how effectively professional athletes can perform that are beyond their willful control. Football supporters often do not see or acknowledge these involuntary limitations and criticize players for "not wanting it [victory] enough" or "not trying hard enough." Often, they think that players' stratospheric pay acts as a *disincentive* to conscientious performance (players get ginormous pay regardless of how well they perform). The latter point has often been made about higher earners in industrial and commercial roles: they too get their super-high pay regardless of how effectively they or their company perform. My football example is an illustration of limits on effective performance that are beyond the performer's willful control. But it doesn't support the idea that the will of strategically positioned citizens in a just society might be psychologically constrained in ways that prevent them from performing effectively without the spur of high *monetary* rewards; if anything, it tells against it.

satisfied when set at the level that makes the poorest as well off as they can be within the constraints deriving from limitations embedded in people's psychology that are impervious to their willful control, even though this generates substantial economic inequality.[20]

Cohen relates that he previously believed that if this hypothetical turned out to be the case, then given that the difference principle would be satisfied, the economic distribution it generated would ipso facto be just, or rather, not unjust.[21] His reconsidered view, however, is that despite the difference principle being satisfied under the hypothetical scenario, the resulting economic distribution (consisting of substantial inequality) would be *unjust*, which shows that the difference principle is not, after all, an adequate principle of distributive justice. The reason Cohen gives for this conclusion is that the inequality under this scenario emanates from *morally arbitrary* causes, that is, from attributes of the richest that have no justificatory force. They benefit economically from the brute psychological fact that they are simply unable to perform effectively without motivating incentives. But this psychological state is as morally arbitrary vis-à-vis justifying their economic good fortune as the supposedly inherent abilities that enable them to become the richest and that give rise to the need for the difference principle in the first place. So, Cohen reminds Rawlsians of their professed commitment to the proposition that morally arbitrary causes of economic success cannot *justify* that success (though they can furnish reasons to allow it). In consolidation of this conclusion, Cohen invites us to reflect on a society with substantial inequality that nevertheless satisfies the difference principle, along the lines hypothesized above. It will seem, prima facie, that this society is thereby just (or not unjust). But if we now imagine a change to the psychology that rendered the richest citizens unable to perform effectively without substantial incentives such that they can now perform as effectively with less incentive, then we must conclude that, in virtue of there being less economic inequality, the resulting new distribution will be "*more* just"[22] (or less unjust).

Try as I might, I'm unable to share Cohen's evaluation of the justness of a society that has substantial economic inequality due to the richest being literally *unable* to perform productively without the substantial incentives that generate it. If it is an immalleable, non-agential property of human psychology that makes incentive-generated inequality necessary, then that looks to me patently not an unjust source or outcome, regrettable though it may be. It might well be appropriate for the richest harboring this psychology to experience what Bernard Williams calls "agent regret,"[23] that is, to

[20] Cohen says that this amounts to it not being possible to implement the difference principle strictly interpreted; I think it would be strictly implemented so long as the resulting inequality came only from whatever level of incentive the richest were *able* to accept.
[21] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice*, 153.
[22] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice*, 154.
[23] Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

feel a certain remorse at faultlessly being the cause of the irremediable misfortune of the poorest. But a non-agential property of human psychology is just a brute fact of nature, and it is not appropriate to regard non-agential facts of nature that cause human suffering (for example, earthquakes, diseases) as unjust. Therefore, were a society to become less economically unequal due to diminishment of people's inability to perform effectively without high incentives, the appropriate evaluation is surely that such a society is *better*, *preferable*, and to be *welcomed*, but not more *just.*

The utopian (or dystopian) nature of Cohen's objection to the difference principle itself is encapsulated in his statement that "justice is justice, whether or not it is possible to achieve it," and that if it is the case that people cannot perform effectively in wealth-generating roles without economic incentives, then "their very makeup is unjust: they cannot help being unjust."[24] The possible inability under consideration is, I think, quite implausible,[25] though its implausibility depends on *how much* incentive we are to contemplate is needed to overcome it, and this, by the nature of the exercise, is unspecified. Also, more realistically, the phenomenon in question would be *difficulty* rather than literal *inability.* But what degree of difficulty exactly? If it turned out that the inability or difficulty is indeed severe and extensive, then it would be wise to bite that bullet and concentrate on identifying how much incentive is necessary due to inability or difficulty, and how much is due to unwillingness, and then to accept the former while working to overcome the latter. I realize, of course, that Cohen's critical probing of the difference principle itself is an exercise in ideal theory, as is most of contemporary Rawlsian political philosophy, and I acknowledge that this is a valuable enterprise. Moreover, the second half of *Rescuing Justice and Equality* proffers intricate metaethical motivation and support for Cohen's ultimate rejection of the difference principle via his argument for the thesis that fundamental principles of justice are "fact-independent." But still, to arrive at the conclusion that it may not be possible to achieve true justice due to certain unalterable facts of human nature seems to me to take us away from, not closer to, what justice is. I now switch attention to Cohen's resolutely nonideal question, directed at self-identifying egalitarians in current-day unjust society: "If you're an egalitarian, how come you're so rich?"

## IV. If You're an Egalitarian …

There is something prima facie peculiar about those who present themselves as fervently believing in economic equality and who advocate a much more equal society than the one in which they are living, but who are

[24] Cohen, *Rescuing Justice*, 155.

[25] I think Cohen regards it as implausible, too, though he says only that *unwillingness* to work effectively without incentives is "more plausible" than *inability* to do so (*Rescuing Justice*, 172).

themselves much better off than they would be under the form of equality that they advocate. This is the puzzle of the "rich egalitarian." In his essay that sets out and explores the puzzle, Cohen registers surprise that no philosopher of egalitarianism had previously seen fit to interrogate what is going on with the rich egalitarian.[26] Surprise is particularly apropos given that the peculiarity of the rich egalitarian's stance is immediately apparent to the beholder. One gets a strong sense of the peculiarity from the question alone, even before reading Cohen's analysis of it. Cohen postulates two contrasting possible reasons for the lack of previous philosophical attention: "the posture of a rich egalitarian is too obviously indefensible to be worth investigating" or "it is too obviously innocent to require defending."[27] He thinks that egalitarian philosophers will hold one or the other reason, though he doesn't say whether he thinks it likely to be a 50–50 split, or one of the reasons more favored than the other, or nearly all holding one of the reasons and very few the other (nor which way round that might be). For what it's worth, I suspect that most egalitarian philosophers would incline toward "it's too obviously innocent to require defending," whereas experience of discussing rich egalitarianism with students over the years gives me the impression that non-egalitarian and egalitarian non-professional philosophers favor the opposite reason.

However, what puzzles me more than the absence of philosophical attention given to the stance of the rich egalitarian prior to Cohen's inquiry is that there has been hardly any more *since.* One might think this unsurprising if egalitarian philosophers continue to hold either of the reasons Cohen suggests for it seeming to be a philosophically uninteresting question. Yet Cohen's inquiry surely establishes, at least, that the stance of the rich egalitarian is neither too obviously innocent nor too obviously indefensible to be worth inquiring into, especially given that Cohen ends his inquiry with adverted inconclusiveness. The only substantial writing of which I'm aware that engages extensively with the stance of the rich egalitarian is a recent article by Jason Brennan and Christopher Freiman.[28] Even Cohen himself subsequently saw fit to add very little to his original discussion, despite

[26] Cohen anticipates the counterclaim that Shelly Kagan's argument for the unrecognized demandingness of morality (in Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1989]) warrants priority. He thwarts the objection by pointing out that Kagan pursues significantly different questions. But Cohen does not mention (and presumably didn't notice) what I take to be a more plausible claim to priority, namely, Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229–43. On this matter, see Nigel Pleasants, "Rich Egalitarianism, Ordinary Politics, and the Demands of Justice," *Inquiry* 45, no. 1 (2002): 113–15. Even so, Singer's priority, if that's what it is, does not diminish the originality and brilliance of Cohen's essay.

[27] Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 152.

[28] Jason Brennan and Christopher Freiman, "If You're an Egalitarian, You Shouldn't Be So Rich," *The Journal of Ethics* 25, no. 3 (2021): 323–37. Other writings that engage with it are the (plentiful) reviews of Cohen's *If You're an Egalitarian*, but in each of these the space given to the rich egalitarian question is a fraction of that given to the critique of the incentives justification of inequality.

going on to write a book (*Rescuing Justice and Equality*) on his criticisms of the Rawlsian ideal theory of justice.[29]

### *A. "If You're an egalitarian, you shouldn't be so rich"?*

Since the article by Brennan and Freiman is the only writing to engage at length with Cohen's question, I will take some time to assess its contribution. The crux of their article is that "the case against being a rich egalitarian is significantly stronger than Cohen suggests."[30] They prosecute that case by way of some ingenious examples and analogies as well as some neat arguments. However, most of this is directed at justificatory responses a rich egalitarian might offer (for example, the "drop in the ocean" rejoinder), which were effectively discredited by Cohen in his original essay. Brennan and Freiman make much use of the device of comparing the rich egalitarian's situation with someone knowingly in receipt of stolen goods. Superficially, this seems to imply that the rich egalitarian's "excess wealth" is in the same moral category as possession of stolen goods. But there are as many pertinent dissimilarities as there are similarities between the two situations. For example, knowing possession of stolen goods is a *criminal* offense; stolen goods belong to and have been taken from someone else, whereas for the rich egalitarian to retain what they believe to be their excess wealth is only to forgo the opportunity of unilaterally acting on a principle of justice that they believe in but know that few others do. Retaining stolen goods risks not just criminal sanction but also unanimous moral condemnation, so the fact must be kept secret. Retaining "excess wealth," by contrast, is not only no criminal offense, but is considered unequivocally wrong by hardly anyone, and is critically questioned by very few. It still might be the case, of course, that the rich egalitarian lacks justification for retaining their "excess wealth," but the stolen goods analogy contributes little to establishing that this is so.

But Cohen's question is not the one that Brennan and Freiman's stolen goods analogy dramatizes, namely, "Does the rich egalitarian lack moral justification *tout court* for retaining 'excess wealth'?" It is, rather, "Does the rich egalitarian lack justification for their wealth relative to their own belief in economic equality?" As Cohen puts it, his question is "How can a rich egalitarian believe that their excess wealth retainment 'is not out of line with

[29] The only instance of which I'm aware is his brief discussion in Cohen, *Rescuing Justice* (170–71) of a question related to "If you're an egalitarian, how come you're so rich?" The related question, in the context of a well-off citizen who avows support for the difference principle in a "just" society and takes advantage of incentive-generated economic rewards, is: "Can she really believe in the difference principle?" Cohen deliberately excluded from his original inquiry the equivalent of this question, addressed to the rich egalitarian, namely: "As you're so rich, are you really an egalitarian?" I thought at the time that the exclusion was unduly dismissive. See Pleasants, "Rich Egalitarianism," 115.

[30] Brennan and Freiman, "If You're an Egalitarian," 324.

his own principles'?"[31] This central motivating feature of Cohen's question is left out by Brennan and Freiman. Their misconstrual is evident in the abstract to their article, which asserts that "G. A. Cohen famously claims that egalitarians shouldn't be so rich." But Cohen does not claim this; it is what Brennan and Freiman vehemently argue for: "this paper argues egalitarians should not be so rich."[32] However, the premise of this conclusion is not that rich egalitarians' own beliefs require it, but that egalitarianism is true. More precisely, their conclusion that "egalitarians should not be so rich" is conditional on egalitarianism being true: "if egalitarianism is true, they have personal obligations to donate their extra wealth and income either to the poor, to egalitarian political advocacy, or directly to governments."[33] Therefore, what Brennan and Freiman claim that rich egalitarians should do (become "not so rich") must hold equally for "rich" people who *do not* believe economic egalitarianism to be true. Their injunction would, therefore, have been better phrased as: "If egalitarianism is true, you shouldn't be so rich" or "If egalitarianism is true, rich people shouldn't be so rich," which is evidently rather banal. Most rich and well-off people, though, are not economic egalitarians and do not believe that economic egalitarianism is true,[34] so Brennan and Freiman's exhortation that rich people shouldn't be so rich looks arbitrary in being restricted to rich *egalitarians*.

Clearly, rich egalitarians have stronger reasons than rich non-egalitarians to give up their "excess wealth," in virtue of their *belief* in economic egalitarianism. Rich non-egalitarians have a good excuse for not giving up their excess wealth, in virtue of believing that economic egalitarianism is false (and if it *is* false, they don't need an excuse), so long as they are blameless for their ignorance (if that's what it is). Even so, if Brennan and Freiman's qualification that egalitarianism is true is made advisedly, then it makes little difference whether a "rich" person believes it or not in terms of them being morally obligated to give up their excess wealth. Speaking as a vegetarian who believes that moral vegetarianism is true, I take it that the obligation not to eat meat holds equally for meat-eaters who believe moral vegetarianism to be false and meat-eaters who believe it to be true.

Brennan and Freiman do, at one point, momentarily direct their injunction on not being so rich at all rich people: "if egalitarianism is true, then all

[31] Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 156; note that only the material in single-quotation marks within this question is from Cohen.

[32] Brennan and Freiman, "If You're an Egalitarian," 324.

[33] Brennan and Freiman, "If You're an Egalitarian," 324; also, "rich egalitarians are under an obligation to give away their excess income, assuming egalitarianism is true," 325.

[34] As attested by national electoral results, most poor people do not believe that economic egalitarianism is true either, and significantly more "rich" than "poor" people believe in some kind of economic egalitarianism. I have been aware of these facts for a very long time, and still find them difficult to explain, even though I have been both "poor" and "rich" in Cohen's senses.

rich people … should open their checkbooks and start donating."[35] If egalitarianism *is* true, inclusiveness makes rich egalitarians look good by comparison with rich non-egalitarians, for the former do at least have economic egalitarian beliefs and discharge their *political* responsibility vis-à-vis those beliefs (by supporting political parties that promise to institute greater economic equality if elected). It is, then, somewhat morally arbitrary for Brennan and Freiman to direct their injunction on what rich people are morally obligated to do only at rich *egalitarians*, if for no other reason than that there are far more rich non-egalitarians than rich egalitarians. If Brennan and Freiman are themselves egalitarians, their exhortative energies might have been better spent trying to persuade the multitude of rich non-egalitarians that economic egalitarianism is true and that they should support it politically and act in accord with it, than cajoling the handful of rich egalitarians to do so unilaterally.

I find it puzzling that Brennan and Freiman premise their conclusion that "egalitarians should not be so rich" on economic egalitarianism being true. Perhaps they did not intend the conditional to be taken literally. Maybe they just meant, à la Cohen, "if rich egalitarians *believe* that egalitarianism is true, they shouldn't be so rich." If this is what they meant, the examples, analogies, and arguments that they deploy against the rich egalitarian do not require egalitarianism to be true; even if it is false, all that matters is that the rich egalitarian *believes* it to be true. But I suspect that Brennan and Freiman are not themselves (economic) egalitarians—their rather moralistic tone toward the figure of the rich egalitarian suggests they might not be.[36] This might be why they concede that if egalitarianism is true *all* rich people have these personal obligations yet direct their argument only at rich egalitarians. Because, of course, only *rich* egalitarians have a case to answer if economic egalitarianism is false.

Admittedly, one needn't be an economic egalitarian to have a view on whether there is any reasonable justification the rich egalitarian could appeal to in rejecting the insinuation that there might be a contradiction between their political belief and their personal behavior. Nonvegetarians are entitled to ask professed "vegetarians" who regularly eat meat, "If you're a vegetarian, how come you eat meat?"—especially were the latter to maintain that doing so is not incompatible with their belief in vegetarianism.[37]

[35] Brennan and Freiman, "If You're an Egalitarian," 326.

[36] Unlike Cohen, who is upfront about both his egalitarianism and his "richness" (though not what his reasons for continuing to be a rich egalitarian are, nor whether he's inclined to offer an excuse or justification), Brennan and Freiman do not say whether or not they are egalitarians.

[37] As noted above, Cohen said in his original discussion that he wouldn't entertain the question: "As you're so rich, are you *really* an egalitarian?" He insisted that he was interested only in those who *do* sincerely believe in egalitarianism. Of this target group, he avows, "I *know* they believe in it" (*If You're an Egalitarian*, 157). But in the case of the meat-eating professed vegetarian, I think it's pretty clear that we wouldn't accept that such a person does believe in vegetarianism, however sincere they seemed to be about it. This is because legitimate application of the epithet "vegetarian" is criterially dependent on how the object of the epithet behaves, not on how subjectively certain and sincere they are about "believing" in

That being said, however, the *standing* of the interrogatory questioner is an important issue to consider.[38] A non-egalitarian or nonvegetarian is entitled to pose the question, having perceived ostensible hypocrisy in the questionee's comportment. Nevertheless, there is a tendency for a questioner so positioned to be harsh and moralistic, and to use purported interest in exposing hypocrisy as a stick with which to beat both the questionee and the belief they avow. Quite often, I think, such a questioner intends their question as a dramatization of the unlivability of the principle in question: "Behold, not even professed egalitarians/vegetarians can, or are willing to, live up to their own principle, which just goes to show how unrealistic it is!" Thus, the injunction that rich egalitarians should be true to their own economic egalitarian principles, conjoined with the realistic recognition that this is not going to happen, becomes an attack on economic egalitarianism itself.

### *B. Why has the "rich egalitarian" question been ignored?*

Notwithstanding my discontentment with Brennan and Freiman's response to Cohen's "if you're an egalitarian" question, my aim is not to come up with anything more definitive than Cohen managed in his reflections on it. Difficult though I find it to figure out what I think of the most plausible justifications of rich egalitarianism, I am still more flummoxed by the lack of philosophical engagement with Cohen's exploration of the issues. This lack is especially stark when juxtaposed with the large and still growing literature that has taken up his challenge to the incentives justification of economic inequality. Isn't it odd that so much is written about how egalitarians should and would behave in an ideally just possible *future* society, and hardly anything on the actual behavior of well-off egalitarians in actually existing current society? It is this striking lack of attention given to, and seeming interest in, Cohen's rich egalitarian question that I will attempt tentatively to explain.

One possible reason for the lack of attention might be that Cohen's exploration of the "if you're an egalitarian" question is not particularly interesting or relevant to moral and political philosophers. This possibility can be dismissed summarily: the relevance is apparent given that the

vegetarianism. It is worth reflecting on why one accepts that sincere rich egalitarians are indeed egalitarians, but denies that meat-eating vegetarians are, or can be, vegetarians. These days at least, the idea of a meat-eating vegetarian is rather fanciful, though years ago I occasionally heard mention of people who reputedly ate chicken but still considered themselves vegetarian. More realistic is for vegetarians to be assailed with an interrogatory question of the kind: "If you're a vegetarian, how come you wear leather shoes?" See, e.g., Ian Hacking, "Our Fellow Animals," *The New York Review of Books* 47, no. 11, June 29, 2000.

[38] Cohen himself was acutely sensitive to the relevance of standing-to-criticize—see "Casting the First Stone: Who Can, and Who Can't, Condemn the Terrorists?" in *Finding Oneself in the Other*, ed. Michael Otsuka (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); cf. his "interpersonal test" for the justification of economic incentives in Cohen, "Incentives, Inequality," 280–81.

question is intimately related to that of how "rich" the richest should be allowed to become in relation to the poorest in a society governed by the difference principle, which evidently has been, and is, of great interest. Moreover, it seems equally apparent that questions about how self-identifying egalitarians in current, unjust society behave, and how they should behave in relation to their egalitarian principles, is of utmost significance to the egalitarian project of achieving an economically just society. Another possible reason for the lack is that having identified and critically examined the issues with his characteristic acuity and painstakingness, Cohen exhausted the topic in one fell swoop. This too can be swiftly dismissed given the interest and relevance of Cohen's question, established above. The idea that moral and political philosophers would have nothing more to say than the original attempt to address an issue that is interesting, relevant, and important to them is beyond credibility. In that original attempt, Cohen himself conceded the "incompleteness" of his inquiry, concluding that "there is a great deal more to be said about the problem of the rich egalitarian, but the present exercise … was only to put forward considerations that bear on the problem."[39]

Finally, what about Cohen's conjecture that philosophers hadn't addressed the issues raised by "the posture of rich egalitarians" prior to his inquiry because they found it either "obviously indefensible" or "obviously innocent"? Might this continue to be the reason why the philosophical community has not taken up the issues that Cohen's question identified? I'm not persuaded that this is the reason for the lack of attention, either prior or subsequent to Cohen's inquiry. Philosophers are not known for letting lie behaviors and stances that seem obviously indefensible or obviously innocent. Subsequent to Cohen's seminal inquiry, it is surely incumbent on any philosopher who thinks the rich egalitarian's stance "indefensible" or "innocent," to argue for that view and not merely assume it, as *might* have been reasonable prior to that inquiry.

Here are my thoughts on explaining the lack of philosophical engagement with Cohen's rich egalitarian question. The principal factor, I think, is the deeply personal and discomforting nature of that question. There is an obvious sense in which Cohen's question, presented in the way that it is, in direct, confrontational, second-person address, demands personal accountability of a kind that is unusual in academic philosophy. The question pushes at the bounds of politeness and civility. But I think the discombobulation brought on by the question goes beyond social awkwardness and infringement of etiquette. I think the question evinces deep personal ambivalence, even in the committed egalitarian, toward the value of economic equality. In essence, my suggestion is that the rich egalitarian question incites in the addressee both explicit positive moral and political beliefs

[39] Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 179.

in the value of economic equality, and what Tamar Gendler calls "*aliefs*,"[40] which run in a contrary direction.

Aliefs are belief-like states but more primitive, being impervious to evidence, revision, and rejection—they "operate at a level that is relatively … impenetrable by controlled rational processes."[41] Gendler offers a number of vivid examples, such as "stand[ing] on a transparent glass walkway projecting over the Grand Canyon,"[42] which one knows to be perfectly safe, but unshakeably feels to be deadly dangerous. An example from the moral domain that exhibits "alief-belief discordance" is "the horror that most humans confront in undertaking necessary violence" such as killing, even when it is believed to be "necessary to harm or kill for the greater good."[43] A related example is James Baillie's resonant identification of the phenomenon whereby each of us "*knows*" that we will die at some point in the future, and yet "there is another sense in which we cannot fully *believe*" that we *will* die.[44] That is, as Baillie puts it, "we typically go about our lives as though we had all the time in the world." We ordinarily (when not in danger or severely ill) experience ourselves as if we were amortal, though of course, we know that we are not. Our explicit belief about our mortality has an abstract, nonpersonal quality that is strikingly different from an occurrent alief directed at our likely impending death, as when, for example, we have a near-miss traffic incident. One can be blasé about the truthful proposition that one will (like everyone else) die at some definite but indeterminate time in the future, but still be panicked by aliefs occasioned by an imminent threat of mortal danger.

My suggestion, then, is that while egalitarian philosophers have sincere beliefs in the value of economic equality and are *politically* committed to its realization, Cohen's rich egalitarian question typically evinces "value-discordant aliefs." Akin to the belief/alief discordance regarding one's mortality, belief in the value of economic equality is abstract, nonpersonal, and indeterminate, whereas the alief provoked by the rich egalitarian question is intrinsically about how economic equality impacts *oneself*. Thus, the aliefs are directed at what it would involve personally, what that would be like, and what the consequences would be for oneself and one's family to do what the rich egalitarian question implies, that is, surrender a substantial portion of one's "excess wealth."[45] The aliefs, being *aliefs*, bring these issues to one's consciousness in a very visceral, graphic, and discomforting way—they vividly depict what one would *lose* and what it would *cost*. Political

[40] Tamar Szabó Gendler, "On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias," *Philosophical Studies* 156, no. 1 (2011): 33–63.
[41] Gendler, "On the Epistemic Costs," 41.
[42] Gendler, "On the Epistemic Costs," 41.
[43] Gendler, "On the Epistemic Costs," 42n25.
[44] James Baillie, "The Expectation of Nothingness," *Philosophical Studies* 166, supp. 1 (2013): S185–S203 (my emphasis).
[45] Cohen goes into some of these considerations, such as "*excessive demands on the will*," "special costs," "relative-disadvantage"; Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 169–76.

*beliefs* on economic equality, on the other hand, are about more abstract ideas, such as fairness, people in general, the future, and whole societies.

Because we all were born into, and live in, an "ethos" (to use Cohen's favored term) in which economic inequality is not only justified but celebrated, our aliefs are individually mediated expressions of those institutionalized norms. For most people, who do not believe in economic equality, their aliefs will be "belief-concordant"; but for egalitarian philosophers, who believe explicitly in the value of economic equality, the rich egalitarian question is likely to elicit occurrent belief-discordant aliefs. The affective and behavioral components of these aliefs are that economic equality is bad for self and to be avoided, which is sharply dissonant with belief in the rightness of economic equality. These aliefs will be especially potent in our current social and political environment, in which the economic egalitarian philosopher knows that not only are they in a small minority in virtue of their egalitarian beliefs, but that they would also join an infinitesimal minority were they to give up their "excess wealth."

In sum, the rich egalitarian has available the following possible modes of response to Cohen's question:

(i) Acknowledge the contradiction between their beliefs and their behavior, and vow to change their beliefs so as to remove the contradiction (by conceding that, as Nagel says a colleague of his did in response to Cohen's question, "I guess I'm not an egalitarian" after all).[46]
(ii) Acknowledge the contradiction between their beliefs and their behavior, and change their behavior by giving up a substantial portion of what is, by their own lights, their "excess wealth."
(iii) Acknowledge the contradiction between their beliefs and their behavior, but insist that the beliefs are genuine and plead moral weakness or weakness of will as an excuse for being unwilling/unable to change their behavior (by giving up their "excess wealth").
(iv) Deny that their beliefs are contradicted by their behavior and proffer a justification as to why this is so.
(v) Ignore, evade, or refuse to engage with the question.

Response (i) is not an easy or congenial option because it means giving up beliefs that are central to one's political identity; (ii) is difficult to (commit to) act on because of the effects of the *aliefs* militating against it; (iii) is distinctly unedifying; (iv) is difficult to pull off because it is intellectually difficult to come up with anything that looks like a plausible, non-self-serving justification. In the face of these formidable obstacles, the easiest and safest path is

[46] Nagel, "Getting Personal," 6.

(v), which, I conjecture, explains much of the lack of philosophical engagement with Cohen's rich egalitarian question.

## V. Conclusion

My attempt to explain the lack of philosophical attention given to Cohen's rich egalitarian question aspires to no more than explanation of that fact. It is not intended as a moral critique of the rich egalitarian's stance (nor is it a defense). I think the rich egalitarian is in a difficult position, a difficulty that is exacerbated by belonging to a society in which few believe in economic egalitarianism, never mind act in accordance with it. I would also point out that the rich egalitarian is not in a *uniquely* difficult position—their difficulty is shared by everyone, including economic non-egalitarians, with regard to the obligation to go beyond mere *political* support for racial, gender, sexual, and climate justice, as canvassed above.

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