Utopianism as a Rationale for Egalitarianism

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Introduction

In his *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, G. A. Cohen discusses the nature of personal beliefs, political philosophies, and selected sites of intersection between the two. Cohen's book is a quest for "a *justification for not giving* if the state does not force me to." (Cohen 170) Not to spoil the ending for those who haven't had the pleasure of reading this book, but plenty of such justifications are produced. It would, after all, be striking if Cohen's conclusion was that rich egalitarians should give all, or even a significant portion of, their earnings to those worse-off than themselves (considering the potential implications of such a conclusion for Cohen himself, a self-professed rich egalitarian).

But our generic rich egalitarian (let's call him 'A' for now) remains, at least for the moment, on the horns of a dilemma. Cohen captures the basic logical structure of that dilemma in the following formulation:

[1] A believes in equality.
[2] A is rich (which means that A does not give a relevant amount of his money away).
[3] (A believes that) A's behavior is not out of line with his own principles.
(Cohen 156-7, numeric substitutions mine)

The only way for A to escape inconsistency is to somehow rectify this apparently paradoxical stance or abandon it altogether. What Cohen is looking for is possible justifications (as opposed to mere excuses) that rich egalitarians could give for believing [3], given the validity of [1] and [2] (Cohen 157-8).

My aim in this paper is demonstrate that actual egalitarian social practices are unsustainable in most circumstances, thus diffusing Cohen's conundrum by providing an 'out' for our rich egalitarian. I will also try to provide a balm for the troubles produced by continuing inequality, by showing how embracing a common conception of utopia can assist a society in its efforts towards establishing egalitarian practices. Doing so will first require an explanation of how giving, like any social practice, can be

thought of in terms of being externally suggested, internally willed, or some combination of the two.

Promoting Social Change from Within

Regarding justice and social practices Cohen states that:

> …justice cannot be a matter only of the state-legislated structure in which people act but is also a matter of the acts they choose within that structure, the personal choices of their daily lives. I have come to think, in the words of a recently familiar slogan, that the personal is political… that principles of distributive justice—principles, that is, about the just distribution of benefits and burdens in society—apply, whatever else they do, to people's legally unconstrained choices. (Cohen 122)

Social practices that are not legally constrained by the state may be constrained in other ways; for example, by morality. Morality is not silent on the subject of Cohen's concern, the practice of giving: From a moral standpoint, for me to be morally obligated to give something to you, I would have to be in the context of a situation wherein I could sacrifice the means that I possess to satisfy *my wants* (which are presumably not crucial for my existence) in order to provide you with the means that you require to satisfy *your needs* (which are presumably crucial for your existence). I would obviously *not*, however, be morally obligated to surrender the means I possess to satisfy *my needs* in order to provide you with the means that you require to satisfy *your wants*. Neither (even) would I be obligated to surrender the means I possess to satisfy *my needs* in order to provide you with the means that you require to satisfy *your needs*. Nor would I be obligated to surrender the means I possess to satisfy *my wants* in order to provide you with the means that you require to satisfy *your wants*. It is recognized in such matters that, all other things being equal, the self is in the position of moral primacy. As is shown above, it acts as a moral tiebreaker when comparable duties to one's self and to others are in conflict. To deny oneself this primacy in their moral considerations would be to enter into the realm of the morally supererogatory. What Cohen is exploring here with regard to giving conforms to this principle of the primacy of one's self. The reason the rich egalitarian who keeps his money to himself is a morally suspect entity is simply because he puts his *wants* above others' *needs*, in a social context wherein one's duty to others is obviously more morally pressing than catering to one's own desires.

But in order to awake ourselves to our moral duties, it seems as if we must make others count for something in our lives. This is correlative to the new problem of socialist solidarity as articulated by Cohen, to wit: "How can a Boeing technician in Seattle envisage "getting together" with a laborer on an Indian tea plantation? If there is to be any form of solidarity linking such people, it needs, once again, the moral leavening which seemed so unnecessary for proletarian solidarity in the past. The hugely better off in the world's proletariat must become highly sensitive to moral appeals for there to be any progress along these lines." (Cohen 112) How are we to take Cohen's appeals for heightened moral sensitivity? Appeals to modify one's moral sensitivities are, on the face of it, no more compelling than appeals to modify one's way of living, the second being a necessary condition for the realization of a utopia, and the first being merely utopian in that 'wouldn't-it-be-great-if-everybody-could-get-along' dreamy sort of way.

According to Cohen, the "central way in which a social ethos changes" is that some people lead by virtuous example, embracing new social practices, and that then others follow them, and still other followers follow those followers, and so on until eventually the majority of society has accepted new social practices and it then becomes more difficult to partake in antiquated social practices than it does to embrace the new ones (Cohen 144). Cohen's description of this process is highly reminiscent of Aristotelian virtue ethics, wherein one first witnesses the acts of moral exemplars and then seeks to imitate them. Thus, on his account one's personal acts of philanthropy may turn out to be moral actions as political in their effect as acts of terrorism and civil unrest, albeit the effects of former may be more subtle.

As the young Cohen once reportedly ventured to his Uncle Norman, political activity *does* intuitively seem to reflect strong moral commitments on the part of the activist (Cohen 101). However, the opposite does not intuitively hold: strong moral commitments on the part of a person are not necessarily reflected in the form of political activism. I will discuss this contrast more thoroughly in the next section.

The Possibility of Social Change from Within

In an article entitled "Why Not Socialism?" (published in Broadbent's *Democratic Equality: What Went Wrong?*) Cohen uses the example of a paradigmatic camping trip to

demonstrate that, under certain conditions, most of us would prefer to behave in an egalitarian manner, given that a favorable ethos attends those conditions. Granted, if I ate all the hot dogs on a camping trip, or refused to share my campfire, then it would most likely be fair to say that my inegalitarian behavior was unwarranted, and that I would be the butt of the unfavorable criticism of my fellow campers. But I think that the premises that egalitarianism is sustainable, or that we are naturally inclined towards egalitarianism in a more general way are, unfortunately, not convincingly supported by this example.

My objections to this characterization of human nature are as follows: First, the very purpose of a camping trip may be to explicitly produce an artificial environment where egalitarianism can temporarily exist, effecting a leveling of social barriers intentioned to facilitate the enjoyment of all involved. So it's not fair to say that our behavior in an artificial environment is any indication of what our natural preferences towards egalitarianism are. Second, let's face it: as much as we may enjoy communing with each other and treating each other in an equal fashion, many of us will be quite relieved when the camping trip ends: when we get to go home and things can return to 'normal'. It's hard work being consistently egalitarian, as the title of Cohen's book suggests.

If the camping trip wasn't actually a trip at all but rather a permanent state—say we liked the camping experience so much that we founded a settlement together in the wilderness—then there is little doubt, at least in my mind, that inegalitarian structures similar to those in evidence in the greater society would soon manifest themselves in our little community. Why do I believe this? It is difficult to put succinctly, but I will attempt an explanation. I believe this partly because, as I mentioned before, I think that we would find it difficult to sustain egalitarian attitudes towards each other indefinitely. As we have been indoctrinated in no small way by living in a capitalist society, our social practices would likely fall back into the familiar patterns of the exploitative paradigms of our capitalist home culture, once the permanence of the situation made itself apparent. I think that we can afford the extra effort, sacrifice, and trust that vigilant commitment to equality demands of us, even in a capitalist culture, but (it would seem to be the case for most of us) only in short doses. I also believe that inegalitarian structures would emerge partly because everyday life is a longer, more uncertain game

than a camping trip, one that seems to require that we secure advantages over those around us, so that we do not find ourselves the most disadvantaged of the lot, and thus eventually lose our standing in the community. People living together in a long-term situation (for which a mere camping trip is no adequate model) cannot be certain that the behavior of others, and therefore also their relationships with others, will remain fair, stable, or even non-detrimental.

The situation stated above resembles in no insignificant way a large group coordination problem of the sort analyzed in game theory, as in society we must choose how to conduct ourselves without full knowledge of the future decisions (and, in many cases, the very identities) of the other players. I describe the inherent reasoning informing social transactions within such a problem as follows:

> (1) Since I cannot be certain that others will behave predictably (in fact I may have very good reasons to believe they won't),
> (2) I therefore do not have knowledge of what my relationships with others will come to resemble, and thus cannot plan on these relationships being either beneficial or detrimental, and
> (3) Since I have an interest in self-preservation,
> (4) I therefore should do my best to act prudently to prepare myself for the worst case scenario, using what resources are at my disposal that can be safely allocated for that purpose.

The worst case scenario I mention above is that our relationships with others will prove to be detrimental. We are compelled, therefore, to prepare ourselves for that possibility by securing an advantage of some sort that will act as a break-fall in the case that this worst case scenario is actualized.

The logical framing of this societal rational decision game (at least as I have given it here) requires that we make decisions that are likely to secure advantages for ourselves in the name of prudence. The uncertain nature of human relationships produces a corresponding embrace of inegalitarian strategies in the interest of our own survival and posterity. This is what I would like to call the 'self-preservation hypothesis'. Compare this with what Cohen calls the strong version of the 'selfishness hypothesis', or the "desire both that I be on one of the higher rungs of the ladder of inequality and that others be on lower rungs", and we can see that the two hypotheses are strategically identical. I suggest, however, that Cohen's term is perhaps a bit of a misnomer. Seemingly selfish activity, on my treatment at least, actually comes out

looking more like self-preservation, and inegalitarian practices such as hoarding resources can be seen not as base or regrettable, but as logically advisable according to my 'self-preservation' hypothesis. My treatment, I think, purges the taint of vice that seems inherent to characterizations of behavior as 'selfish' and characterizes these actions as prudent and self-preserving.

My reformulation of 'selfishness' into 'self-preservation' has direct consequence for what Cohen refers to as the 'selfishness defense of inequality'. This defense, he claims, rests on two premises: "First, a *human-nature* premise: that people are by nature selfish. And second, a *sociological* premise: that *if* people are selfish (whether by nature or otherwise), then equality is impossible to achieve and/or sustain." (Cohen 118) On my framing of the problem, the 'human-nature' premise does indeed hold: it would prove difficult (perhaps impossible) to deny that at the bare minimum there is at least a basic instinct to self-preservation in the nature of man. Thus self-preservation, 'sociologically' speaking, also makes equality impossible to sustain unless, as I noted above, we are certain that conditions of social stability will attain and persevere in our society: which they obviously cannot. Thus our rich egalitarians need not worry: since egalitarianism is untenable in practice, they cannot reasonably be expected to give and thus sacrifice the material advantages that self-preservation requires.

Change from Without

All of this is not to say that giving is impossible (maybe on the basis that it reduces our overall chances for self-preservation we could call it irrational), or that we cannot, by times, approach the egalitarian ideal in our practices. The question is; what can inspire and empower us in our efforts to embrace egalitarianism and raise ourselves above the low mean of the self-preservation hypothesis? Rawls, embodying the 'change from without' approach might endorse the establishment of a social institution that would collect a 'charity tax' of sorts from each of us, thus leaving none of us in the precarious position of having given more than our comparatively-placed neighbors. Christian theorists, on the other hand, embodying the 'change from inside' approach might encourage us to remake ourselves into saint-like figures (or perhaps just 'good Christians') who would redistribute whatever extra wealth came into our possessions to

the more needy. Cohen, it seems, wants to straddle this divide and endorse both of these approaches as potential means of redressing inequality.

I have argued that 'change from inside' is unlikely, given the combined effect of what I take to be an irrefutable fact of human nature and our current social climate, and also that, due to the effort involved, egalitarian practices would be impossible to sustain indefinitely. I have not, to repeat, claimed that we cannot approach the egalitarian ideal, and even realize it momentarily, at certain junctures. I believe that the conditions for such a realization, however, must be provided by a favorable 'change from without'.

At the beginning of his *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls identifies four conceptual roles for political philosophy: the first being to examine the causes of conflict between individuals and search for sites of potential agreement therein (these agreements perhaps culminating in the formation of social institutions); the second being to 'orient' individuals to the social institutions of which they are a part; the third being to rationally reconcile individuals to those social institutions to which they may find objectionable; and the fourth being to provide for individuals a palate of reasonable political alternatives for the possible future reshaping of social institutions (Rawls 1-4). It is this fourth role for political philosophy that impresses me most, as Rawls acknowledges the importance of formulating workable utopias to the discipline. It enters our discussion now as a possible answer to the question of how we may best approach egalitarian social practices, given that we are by nature self-preserving animals.

I think that the French utopian socialists whom Cohen mentions (Cohen 47), who adopted the 'engineering' model of imposing 'change from outside' had the right idea. In the absence of persistent social stability, humanity needs at least the *promise of future social stability* in order for cooperative social practices to flourish. The way to ensure this cooperation is not necessarily to get people to literally turn to their neighbors as comrades (because they might just as easily turn on each other in petty disputes) but rather to get people to embrace a common set of utopian ideals. This, I think, is the only way to move past narrow self-preservation as the measure of social transactions. In this formulation, if someone turns on his neighbor, the utopian framework makes it such that the transgressor simply 'failed to live up to the ideal', not that 'human nature is unpredictable and sometimes frightening'. Making utopian ideals the default framework

for judging our social practices encourages cooperation among people rather than fractiousness; and promotes general optimism rather than general pessimism.

To define the concept, a utopia is "…a presentation of a positive and possible alternative to the social reality, intended as a model to be emulated or aspired to." (Eliav-Feldon 1) In the words of Joyce Hertzler: "Among these Utopias we find in most cases searching analyses of current social situations, lucid and fascinating anticipations of a better or perfect society to come, and a presentation of instruments and principles of social progress which men of succeeding epochs have sometimes adopted and used in promoting improvement." (Hertzler 2) In other words, utopians fill out the narrative of a society's history: they can guide along the story of its citizens by writing tentative endpoints for their communal efforts which serve to give their present individual actions more purpose. By rendering current practices and actions as intelligible or unintelligible in the light of some common future goal, a greater net degree of social stability is produced than if such a common future goal were altogether lacking. Under conditions of enhanced social stability, people can ease their focus on self-preservation, and are therefore more likely to partake in and support egalitarian practices.

Socialists, however, may feel uneasy with the idea of embracing utopian idealism. After all, as Chris Sciabarra writes:

> Both the Marxian and Hayekian perspectives agree that utopianism:
> 1. fails to take into account the social and historical context of the society that exists;
> 2. fails to recognize the internal relationship between the theorist and his or her sociohistorical setting;
> 3. reifies human rationality as a capacity abstracted from social and historical specificity;
> 4. depends on constructivist rationalism to bridge the gap between conscious human purposes and unintended social consequences; and
> 5. fails to appreciate the complexity of social action that is constituted by both articulated and tacit elements.
> (Sciabarrra 2)

Such a Marxist criticism of utopianism is only possible because Marxism has taken socialism so far from its roots. Cohen writes that: "Socialism… had been utopian, but now, as a result of Marx's work, it had become a science." (Cohen 102) But seeing socialism as a science depended in a large part on the production of empirical evidence that socialism was, in effect, replacing capitalism as the dominant political system of the

world. However, as we now know, "The proletariat… was ultimately reduced and divided by the increasing technological sophistication of the capitalist production process, which had been expected to continue to expand the proletariat's size and augment its power." (Cohen 104) Given the unpredicted dissolution of the revolutionary proletariat, we must admit that "Marxism has lost much or most of its carapace, its hard shell of supposed fact… it presents itself as a set of values and a set of designs for realizing those values. It is therefore, now, far less different than it could once advertise itself to be from the utopian socialism with which it so proudly contrasted itself." (Cohen 103) Furthermore, Cohen warns that "…socialists must abandon the obstetric conception, and… must, in some measure, be utopian designers..." (Cohen 43-4) So socialists may have more in common with utopians than we once thought, and thus have fewer objections to my thesis than I first expected.

But blunting the socialist attack on utopianism does nothing to change the fact that the language of failure and the language of utopianism have often intersected. Many see the utopian, to borrow the lyrics of John Lennon, as "…a real nowhere man, making all his nowhere plans for nobody." 'Utopia', after all, translated literally, means 'no-place' (Sciabarra 2). However, we should recall that the term was coined by Sir Thomas More in his book of the same name, and that since More is famous for being ironic (James Allard, "More, Thomas", in Audi 591), he could have simply been making a comment to the effect that utopia could just as easily be 'anyplace' if people put their efforts towards actualizing it. But even if utopia is strictly impossible, and thus all utopian efforts are inevitably doomed to future failure, this does not mean that utopian idealism may not be useful as an ideology for promoting egalitarian social practices in the interim.

Humanity is bound together by its collective need to solve a huge problem, a problem finely articulated by Cohen below:

> The problem is to turn the world into a home for humanity, by overcoming the scarcity in the relationship between humanity and nature which induces social division. Scarcity induces social division because it imposes repugnant labor and a consequent class antagonism between those whose lives must be given over to that labor and those whose lighter task it is to see to it that others carry out the repugnant labor that scarcity imposes.
> (Cohen 49)

The problem is overwhelming, and it begs for the blueprint of a future response. To overcome scarcity while aiming towards egalitarian social practices may require, in my opinion, a popular return to utopian idealism. The posing of grand problems requires the formulation of grand solutions.

I said before that egalitarian practices could flourish, at least temporarily, given the expenditure of great effort. In the eyes of the utopian idealist, the present is simply a transitional setting on a journey whose destination is Utopia, and thus it can actually be seen as an analogue for Cohen's camping trip: as a condition under which we—artificially or naturally—are predisposed to egalitarian behavior. Since the potential payoffs for realizing a Utopia are immeasurable, the demands of cooperation required by utopian ventures in the present are justified, regardless of how taxing they may be. Thus utopians can be expected to toil selflessly in their efforts to eliminate scarcity, and still behave in an egalitarian fashion towards each other, given their common adherence to utopian idealism.

Conclusion: Back to the Problem of Giving

My formulation of the 'self-preservation hypothesis' (upon which much of my argument against there being a moral duty to give hinges), closely resembles Thomas Nagel's 'relative-disadvantage' defense for selfishness. Cohen's response to this defense is that "The beauty of a state-imposed duty, or of a *general* ethos of giving is that, when they obtain, each well-paid person can then give without departing from the norm, and therefore without having to accomplish an especially saintly response to peer group constraints." (Cohen 175) However, I would like to point out a crucial difference between Nagel's defense and my generosity-nullifying hypothesis that may save it from Cohen's response. What is at stake in my formulation of the problem is not so much 'falling behind the neighbors', but something much more dire: the notion that if we wish to act prudently, we must hoard resources in order to guard against the possibility of either (1) a sustained attack—economic, physical, or otherwise—by the neighbors (in a Hobbesian state of nature kind of way), or (2) the neglectful response that might be shown by morally indifferent neighbors when we befall disaster, natural or otherwise.

Since we cannot be guaranteed either the beneficence or the compassion of our neighbors, I argue that our rational duty to act in the name of own self-preservation

(whatever modes of behavior this may imply). However, this is not my normatively preferred mode of being for humanity. Rather, it is a reaction born out of a fear of the realization of the 'worst-case scenario'. The means to assuage this fear, and thus the means to provide a rationale for giving to charity and partaking in other egalitarian social practices, I reiterate, is to formulate—and then embrace—a common utopian ideal.

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