Editor-in-Chief's Introduction

J. Angelo Corlett

Received: 23 June 2010 / Accepted: 23 June 2010 / Published online: 13 July 2010
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2010

It with tremendous respect and admiration that *The Journal of Ethics* proudly features this special double issue devoted to the person and work of Gerald Allan Cohen (“Jerry”): 1941–2009. In reading this collection of articles by eminent philosophers, the philosophical influence of Cohen is obvious and important. This issue features contributions by some leading social and political philosophers who respectfully, even if at times vehemently, disagree with Cohen’s analysis of justice, equality, and related concepts. The following summary is based largely on authors’ abstracts of their articles.

In “G. A. Cohen’s Vision of Socialism,” Nicholas Vrousalis provides readers with a carefully constructed tour of Cohen’s major ideas and how they developed over the course of Cohen’s *oeuvre*. Major emphasis is placed on the origin and development of Cohen’s analytical Marxism. It begins from Cohen’s theory of the maldistribution of freedom under capitalism, moves on to his critique of libertarian property rights, to his diagnosis of the “deep inegalitarian” structure of John Rawls’ theory of justice as fairness and concludes with Cohen’s rejection of the “cheap” fraternity promulgated by liberal egalitarianism. Vrousalis’ contention is that Cohen’s work in political philosophy is best understood in the background of lifelong commitment to a form of democratic, non-market, socialism realizing the values of freedom, equality and community, as he conceived them. The first part of the essay is therefore an attempt to retrieve core socialism-related arguments by chronologically examining the development of Cohen’s views, using his books as thematic signposts. The second part brings these arguments together with an eye to reconstructing his vision of socialism. It turns out that Cohen’s political philosophy offers a rich conception of objective and subjective freedom, an original understanding of justice as satisfaction of genuine need, and a substantive ideal of fraternity as justificatory community with others. If properly united, these values

J. Angelo Corlett (✉)
Philosophy and Ethics, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA, USA
e-mail: acorlett@mail.sdsu.edu

can suggest a full-bloodied account of the just polity, and give us a glimpse into what it means, for Cohen, to treat people as equals.

In “Justice as Fairness: Luck Egalitarian, Not Rawlsian,” Michael Otsuka examines Cohen’s claim, which is central to his luck egalitarian account of distributive justice, that forcing others to pay for people’s expensive indulgence is inequalitarian because it amounts to their exploitation. Otsuka argues that the forced subsidy of such indulgence may be unfair, but any such unfairness fails to ground an egalitarian complaint. Otsuka further argues that Cohen’s account of distributive justice has a non-egalitarian as well as an egalitarian element, each arising from an underlying commitment to fairness. Cohen’s account of distributive justice, Otsuka concludes, is therefore one of justice as fairness.

In “Relationships of Equality: A Camping Trip Revisited,” Richard W. Miller devotes his philosophical energies to an examination of Cohen’s final book, *Why Not Socialism?* As Miller reminds us, Cohen argues that our judgments of social justice should fit our convictions about how to interact with others in our personal lives. Ironically, the ordinary morality of cooperation invoked in Cohen’s book undermines his favored principle of equality, and supports Rawls’ reliance on a relevantly impartial choice promoting appropriate fundamental interests as a basis for distributive standards. His further objections to Rawls’ account of distributive justice neglect the role of social relations in establishing the proper scope of that impartiality and the moral force of Rawls’ taxonomy of non-ideal societies. In contrast, the powerful evocation of goods of community at the end of Cohen’s book points to a genuine inadequacy, according to Miller. Conscientious fellow-citizens must take account of the impact of their political choices on options for sharing and caring. In finding a proper balance between these goods and competing individualist concerns, the original position is of too little use to sustain Rawls’ assessment of his conception of justice as complete. In the face of certain moral convictions about how to live together, Miller argues, both Cohen’s luck egalitarianism and Rawls’ barriers between aspirations to community and political choice must give way.

In “Jerry Cohen’s *Why Not Socialism?*: Some Thoughts,” John Roemer focuses his attention on Cohen’s *Why Not Socialism?* wherein Cohen describes various kinds of inequality that would be acceptable under socialism, yet nonetheless harmful to community. Roemer describes another kind of inequality with this property, deriving from the legitimate transmission of preferences and values from parents to children. Moreover, Cohen proposes that the designing a socialist allocation mechanism is a key problem for socialist theory, though Roemer argues that this is less of a problem than Cohen thinks it is.

In a rather lengthy piece, Jan Narveson sets out to provide a comprehensive libertarian assessment of Cohen’s *Rescuing Justice and Equality*. Narveson’s spirited analysis in “Rescuing Cohen” is revealing on many levels, though it is perhaps best construed as an excellent manner by which to grasp the fundamental intuitive differences between socialists like Cohen and libertarians such as Narveson. Crucial differences are brought to the fore with astounding clarity, allowing readers to judge for themselves just what, in large part, it is that separates socialists from libertarians, egalitarians from inequalitarians.

Jonathan Wolff's paper reconsiders some themes and arguments from his earlier paper "Fairness, Respect and the Egalitarian Ethos" which attacks "luck egalitarianism" on the grounds that insisting on luck egalitarianism's standards of fairness undermines relations of mutual respect among citizens. Wolff's paper attempts to explain the reasons that led him to write the earlier paper, assesses the force of its arguments, and locates it in respect to work of Richard Arneson and Elizabeth Anderson. The paper concludes that the attempt to implement an "ideal" theory of equality can harm the very people that the theory is designed to help.

The Journal of Ethics wishes to express its tremendous gratitude to Jerry for having contributed to this journal on more than one occasion, and to the philosophers who have contributed to this special issue in his honor. May you enjoy reading these fine contributions inspired by one of the greatest philosophers of our time: Gerald Allan Cohen.

Collegially yours,

J. Angelo Corlett
Summer, 2010