

Lecture Notes 5 : Community and Inequality

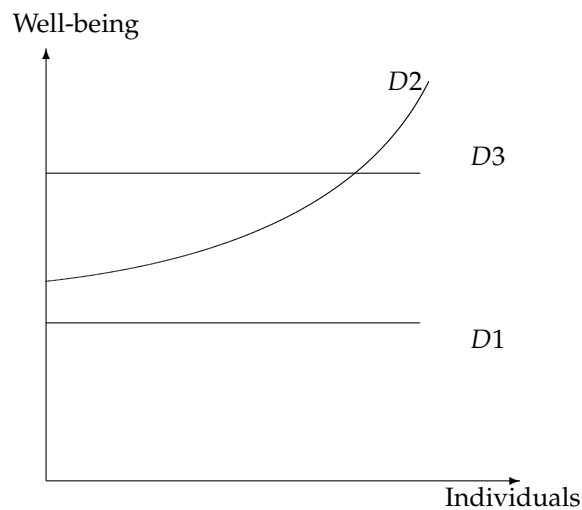
Lecturer: Nicholas Vrousalis

nv211@cam.ac.uk

Is liberalism conducive to fraternity? Rawls thinks it is.

Strict vs. lax readings of the difference principle (DP)

There is a central ambiguity, says G. A. Cohen, in Rawls' specification of the DP: does it include, or exclude, individual intentions under its specification?



Cohen: The strict reading of the DP 'counts inequalities as necessary only when they are, strictly, necessary, that is, apart from people's chosen intentions.' The lax reading, on the other hand, 'countenances intention-relative necessities as well. So, for example, if an inequality is needed to make the badly off better off but only given that talented producers operate as self-interested market maximizers, then that inequality is endorsed by the lax, but not by the strict, reading of the difference principle.'

'Thin' community

Imagine a dialogue between someone kidnapping a child, and the ensuing dialogue with the child's parents.

- (1) Children should be with their parents.
- (2) Unless you pay me, I shall not return your child.
- (3) So you should pay me (Cohen 2008, 39)

The second premise is made true by the kidnapper's own actions. The justification given by Rawls for paying higher salaries to the talented is analogous in structure, says Cohen:

- (4) Economic inequalities are justified when they make the worst off people materially better off.
- (5) When the top marginal rate is 40 percent, (a) the talented rich produce more than they do when it is 60 percent, and (b) the worst-off are, as a result, materially better off.
- (6) Therefore, the top tax should not be raised above 40 percent to 60 percent. (Cohen 2008, 34)

Justificatory Community

The interpersonal test:

This tests how robust a policy argument is by subjecting it to variation with respect to who is speaking and/or who is listening when the argument is presented. The test asks whether the argument could serve as a justification of a mooted policy when uttered by any member of society to any other member. (Cohen 2008, 42)

A justificatory community for Cohen is community which passes the interpersonal test:

A justificatory community is a set of people among whom there prevails a norm (which need not always be satisfied) of comprehensive justification. If what certain people are disposed to do when a policy is in force is part of the justification of that policy, it is considered appropriate to ask them to justify the relevant behaviour, and it detracts from justificatory community when they cannot do so. (Cohen 2008, 42-3)

Fear and Greed

For Cohen, the main ways in which people see each other in capitalist society are either as potential sources of enrichment, or as potential obstacles and threats (or a combination thereof).

An alternative: communal reciprocity

A morally superior form of society, thinks Cohen, will rehearse the conjunction 'serve-and-be-served' as central to human motivation. And as long as the profit motive is the dominant form of social metabolism, such reciprocity cannot be achieved.

Study questions

Can capitalism be reconciled with the value of fraternity?
'Liberalism fosters fraternity.' Discuss.

Further Reading

Cohen, G. A. (2008), *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, HUP, ch. 1.

Vrousalis, N. (2012), 'Jazz Bands, Camping Trips, and Decommodification: G. A. Cohen on Community', *Socialist Studies* 8, 141-163.