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Two Paths to Equality: Differences Between Rawls and Cohen on Equality

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Abstract

In contemporary egalitarian theory, the debate between John Rawls and G. A. Cohen over justice and equality is especially representative. Rawls, beginning with a critique of utilitarianism, constructs the two principles of justice through the device of the veil of ignorance and establishes a liberal egalitarian path grounded in the basic structure of society. Cohen, from the standpoint of analytical Marxism, develops an internal critique of Rawls by challenging the scope of justice and the incentive argument. On that basis, Cohen, as a radical luck egalitarian, advances a theory centered on equal access to advantage, socialist equality of opportunity, and the community principle. He insists that justice must extend to personal choice and egalitarian ethos, and that theory should not compromise with self-interested motivation. Their divergence ultimately stems from different assumptions about human motivation and different theoretical commitments. They therefore represent two distinct paths to equality—one based on institutional accommodation and the other on moral purity. The comparison not only reveals the internal tension of contemporary theories of justice, but also offers important insights into the coordinated role of institutions and social ethos in the pursuit of equality.

Keywords: difference principle; interpersonal test; radical luck egalitarianism; justificatory community

Equality is a central issue in modern political philosophy and an enduring concern of Marxist theories of justice. How equality should be understood, and how freedom and equality should be balanced, has long been a focus of philosophical controversy. In contemporary discussions, Rawls and Cohen represent two highly influential theoretical paths. With justice as fairness at the core of his project, Rawls uses the difference principle to place limits on social inequality and seeks institutional arrangements that benefit the least advantaged while

recognizing factual differences in society. Cohen, by contrast, criticizes Rawls from the standpoint of analytical Marxism and argues for a more demanding conception of equality.

Existing scholarship has mainly concentrated either on explicating Rawls's theory of justice, on clarifying Cohen's egalitarian thought, or on Cohen's criticisms of particular Rawlsian claims such as the difference principle. Although these studies have yielded valuable results, the divergence between the two paths to equality and their deeper internal connection still require more systematic treatment. This article therefore analyzes Rawls's and Cohen's approaches separately, identifies the theoretical characteristics and limits of each, and aims to deepen our understanding of the internal tension within contemporary egalitarian thought.

Rawls's Path to Equality: Institutional Justice and the Difference Principle

In contemporary political philosophy, the institutional path of justice developed by Rawls is one of the major branches of egalitarian theory. Classical utilitarianism, represented by Bentham and Mill, takes "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" as the standard of justice and treats individual rights as instruments for maximizing aggregate welfare. For that very reason, however, it has been criticized for neglecting individual distinctiveness and for making it possible to sacrifice minorities for the sake of overall benefit. Some scholars have noted that, in Mill's utilitarianism, the motivational logic of pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain, together with the priority of aggregate happiness, effectively dissolves the independent moral standing of the individual (Yi & Zhang, 2016), while distributive equality is never treated as a fundamental value in classical utilitarianism (Duan, 2024). Rawls's intervention begins precisely here. As he argues, any theory, no matter how elegant, must be rejected if it is untrue, and institutions, no matter how efficient, must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust; every person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that cannot be overridden even in the name

of overall social welfare (Rawls, 2009, p. 3). For Rawls, the deepest problem with utilitarianism is that it does not take seriously the distinction between persons and may gravely violate the basic rights of innocent minorities for the benefit of the majority.

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls makes clear that he seeks to formulate a conception of justice that can replace both general utilitarianism and its many variants (Rawls, 2009, p. 21). A key point is that he restricts the scope of justice to the domain of social institutions. The primary subject of justice is the basic structure of society: the distribution of basic rights and duties and the regulation of social and economic inequalities and the legitimate expectations attached to them. Since people's starting positions are deeply shaped by morally arbitrary factors, and those factors are themselves major sources of deep social inequality, Rawls argues that a just basic structure must be built to constrain inequalities generated by contingency. On the premise of fair opportunity, only those inequalities that work to the advantage of the least advantaged are permissible (Rawls, 2009, p. 85).

To derive legitimate principles of justice, Rawls introduces the original position and the veil of ignorance. The original position is a hypothetical fair choice situation, and the veil of ignorance is the information-blocking device that secures its fairness. Behind the veil, the parties possess only general social knowledge and know nothing about their own personal traits or social positions (Rawls, 2009, p. 6). Under such conditions, Rawls believes that rational parties would choose principles by means of a maximin strategy—that is, they would select the option whose worst possible outcome is more acceptable than the worst outcomes of the alternatives (Li, 2025). This arrangement ensures that no one can tailor principles to their own natural or social advantages, and it makes the principles of justice the result of a fair agreement among equals (Rawls, 2009, p. 12).

Rawls holds that the parties would ultimately agree on two principles of justice. The first principle states that each person has an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with the same scheme for all. The second principle states that social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity (Rawls, 2009, p. 302).

The first principle is the principle of equal basic liberty. It emphasizes that liberty is universal rather than a privilege for a few, and that liberty may be limited only for the sake of liberty itself, not traded away for economic gain. On questions of distribution, Rawls does not defend absolute equality, because he believes strict equalization would undermine incentives for the talented and reduce the total social product, thereby harming those at the bottom. He therefore acknowledges the factual possibility of social and economic inequality, but insists that any such inequality must be strictly constrained by justice. This is the role of the second principle. Its first layer is the difference principle, which Cohen glosses as the claim that inequalities are just if, and only if, they are necessary to improve the condition of the worst off (Cohen, 2014, p. 68). On this view, reasonable income differences may be allowed if they motivate the talented to produce more and thereby improve the lives of the least advantaged through redistribution. Such inequality is not justified as privilege, but as a means of lifting the position of those who are worst off. The difference principle incorporates the interests of the least advantaged into the core of institutional design and expresses respect for the equal moral standing of all persons. At the same time, it has been criticized for granting the least advantaged what amounts to a veto over inequality without adequately explaining why they are

disadvantaged in the first place, whether because of choice, luck, or other causes (Machin, 2013). This weakness later becomes an important point of entry for Cohen's internal critique of Rawls.

The second layer of Rawls's second principle is fair equality of opportunity. Rawls carefully distinguishes it from merely formal equality of opportunity. Formal equality means only that everyone has the same legal right to compete for advantageous social positions, while leaving the initial distribution of resources strongly affected by natural and social contingencies (Rawls, 2009, p. 72). Because this merely juridical equality does not remove the substantive disadvantages produced by family background, education, and other arbitrary circumstances, Rawls regards it as insufficiently just. Other scholars have made a similar point, arguing that a system of natural liberty fails to restrict the effects of natural chance and social arbitrariness on initial distribution and therefore contains obvious injustice (Wang, 2021). By contrast, fair equality of opportunity requires that individuals with similar talents and similar willingness to use them should enjoy roughly equal prospects of success; achievement should track talent and effort rather than class position (Tang, 2024). Compared with formal opportunity, fair equality of opportunity seeks a fairer starting point. It secures legal equality while also trying to neutralize factors unrelated to personal ability, such as family background and educational resources, so that individuals can gain comparable opportunities through their own efforts. In this sense, it surpasses merely formal equality and responds more directly to real patterns of inequality. Yet even this principle has limits, because it still cannot guarantee genuinely fair competition for people disadvantaged by natural talent or bodily condition.

Rawls explicitly gives lexical priority to the first principle over the second: the institutional system of equal liberty cannot be violated even for the sake of larger social or economic gains (Rawls, 2009, p. 62). Liberty is the basis of personhood and, in the author's view,

also a cornerstone of socialism. This prioritization reflects Rawls's resolute defense of basic rights and dignity. It also shows that, when freedom and equality come into tension, Rawls gives priority to satisfying the demands of freedom. Once liberty is secured, inequality is tolerated only within limits that improve the condition of the least advantaged. This view of equality simultaneously protects liberty and takes equality seriously, but its tolerance of incentive-based inequality and its restriction of justice to institutions leave room for later radical egalitarian criticism.

Cohen's Internal Critique of Rawls and His Theory of Equality

As a representative figure of analytical Marxism, G. A. Cohen was deeply shaped by communist ideals from an early age and maintained a strong commitment to socialist equality. He broadly accepts Rawls's first principle, the principle of equal liberty, but clearly opposes the second principle. In Cohen's view, the incentive-based interpretation of the difference principle cannot be reconciled with the inner demands of justice, and the Rawlsian principle of fair equality of opportunity still remains vulnerable to social and natural contingencies. Cohen also questions Rawls's restriction of justice to the basic structure alone. On this basis, he develops a more demanding luck-egalitarian alternative that attempts to rescue justice from Rawls's insufficiently egalitarian theory.

Reconstructing the Scope of Justice

Rawls argues, on the one hand, that principles of justice apply to the basic structure and that social institutions should be designed so that, whatever happens, the resulting distribution is just (Rawls, 1999, pp. 242–243). Because the basic structure profoundly shapes people's social starting points and life prospects, Rawls believes that the first task of justice is to correct institutional injustice. He also assumes that, in a well-ordered society, people hold different life

plans and conceptions of the good. If justice were used to assess people's character or personal choices, the state would effectively impose a unified moral standard and thereby violate freedom. For that reason, he confines justice to the basic structure and does not direct it at personal virtue. Yet Rawls remains notably ambiguous on one crucial question: whether the family belongs to the coercive basic structure. He acknowledges that the family deeply affects social justice, but he hesitates to incorporate internal family relations fully into a coercive framework of justice.

Feminist theorists were among the first to notice that this ambiguity leaves unjust divisions of labor within the family and the disadvantaged position of women outside the corrective reach of principles of justice. Susan Okin argues that Rawls's wavering on this issue is not a minor indecision, because the problem could be more readily addressed if the family were consistently recognized as part of the basic structure (Abbey, 2016). Cohen extracts from this difficulty a broader point: choices not directly regulated by law still fall within the basic concern of justice (Cohen, 2009, pp. 157–159). In other words, justice does not reside only in legal rules; it also concerns the domain of free choice. At the same time, Cohen rejects the simple solution of merely redefining the family as part of the basic structure if Rawls continues to insist that distributive justice applies only there. If Rawls does not abandon that restriction, Cohen argues, the family cannot be coherently absorbed into the basic structure (Cohen, 2009, p. 159).

According to Cohen, if the Rawlsian basic structure includes only coercive institutions, then many noncoercive factors that powerfully shape distribution—such as inequality inside families and the influence of social ethos on personal choice—are excluded from assessment by justice, even though their effects are no weaker than those of coercive institutions. If Rawls retreats to a purely coercive structure, he contradicts the scale of justice implicit in his own judgments and saddles himself with an arbitrary and unduly narrow account of the subject of

justice (Duan, 2010). If, by contrast, he admits noncoercive factors into the basic structure, then the personal choices in which those factors ultimately terminate will themselves become objects of justice, and Rawls's long-standing claim that justice constrains institutions but not personal choices or motives can no longer stand. Cohen therefore concludes that the scope of justice must move beyond the boundaries of the coercive basic structure and include everyday individual choice and egalitarian social ethos. Without such constraints, even just institutions will be steadily eroded by noninstitutional factors, undermining the realization of equality and justice.

The Injustice of the Incentive Argument

The theoretical support for Rawls's difference principle is the incentive argument. On this view, talented people require higher incomes as incentives to work hard; without those extra rewards they will reduce their productive effort, thereby lowering total output and ultimately harming the least advantaged. Providing high salaries to the talented thus appears justified. Cohen argues, however, that the moral structure of this argument is isomorphic with the logic of ransom. In *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, he illustrates the point through the example of a kidnapper: the kidnapper first creates the threat that the child will not be returned unless ransom is paid, and then invokes the desirable end of reuniting child and parents to justify the payment (Cohen, 2014, p. 34).

Cohen argues that the incentive logic of the talented works in exactly the same way. The talented first choose a self-interested strategy—namely, not to work as hard unless they are paid more—and then transform that private choice into a social fact that everyone else must accommodate. They finally appeal to the good of the least advantaged to cloak their salary demands in moral language. Cohen therefore insists that this is not a genuine defense of justice but a form of moral blackmail by which the talented use their productive advantage as bargaining

power. To reinforce the critique, he proposes the interpersonal test: when a policy argument is advanced, its force should be tested by asking whether it can serve as a justification when addressed by any member of society to any other affected member face to face (Cohen, 2014, p. 37). If the talented were to tell the least advantaged, “I must receive a high salary or I will not work hard, and then your condition will be worse; therefore I ought to be paid more for your sake,” the least advantaged would have every reason to reject the claim. If the talented truly accept the difference principle, why can they not still work conscientiously within a more equal framework? Because the incentive argument depends on a power asymmetry rather than a publicly acceptable reason, it fails the interpersonal test.

Moreover, the incentive argument also lacks legitimacy from the standpoint of the original position. Rawls introduces the veil of ignorance precisely to block the influence of morally arbitrary factors such as natural talent and social origin on distribution, treating the distribution of natural talent as a common social asset rather than as private desert. Yet the incentive argument allows the talented to demand extra rewards on the basis of their giftedness and thereby convert morally arbitrary natural advantages into private gain. For Cohen, this runs directly against the original aspiration of fair distribution.

Cohen’s Core Claim: Radical Luck Egalitarianism

Building on his critique of Rawls’s account of the scope of justice and of the incentive argument, Cohen constructs a more thoroughgoing egalitarian theory. Luck egalitarianism in a broad sense aims to ensure that people bear reasonable responsibility for their own situations only once morally arbitrary contingencies no longer dominate their lives. Cohen radicalizes this view by refusing to treat individual choice and responsibility too quickly as sufficient justification for inequality.

In “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,” Cohen advances the idea of equality of access to advantage. Engaging left-liberal egalitarians such as Ronald Dworkin, Rawls, and Richard Arneson, he argues that neither the Rawlsian and Dworkinian focus on resources nor the Arnesonian focus on opportunity for welfare is adequate. Resource-based views overlook individuals’ unequal capacities to convert resources into actual well-being, while welfare-based views risk requiring compensation for expensive tastes that people voluntarily cultivate. As some commentators summarize, earlier liberal egalitarianism concentrated on compensating inequalities caused by deficits of welfare or resources, but often neglected the responsibility individuals bear when inequality results from their own choices (Yi, 2021). Cohen’s notion of “advantage” is intended to move beyond this opposition. It is a heterogeneous cluster that includes objective resources, subjective welfare, and the conditions under which capacities can be transformed into actual benefit (Cohen, 2011). Because of this broader structure, it can better capture the real circumstances of people’s lives and offer a more inclusive metric of equality.

At the level of implementation, Cohen emphasizes equality in access rather than identity of outcomes. The point is to ensure that everyone has an equal chance to secure advantage, not to force everyone into identical lives. On this basis, only involuntary disadvantages—disadvantages for which agents cannot reasonably be held responsible—should trigger compensation. Once all such disadvantages are corrected, resulting inequalities can in principle be justified (Duan, 2021). Cohen’s proposal thus seeks to strengthen the moral coherence of egalitarian compensation by targeting the elimination of nonvoluntary disadvantage.

Compared with liberal equality, Cohen’s principle of socialist equality of opportunity is still more demanding. It requires not only the elimination of socially produced inequalities, but also the neutralization of advantages generated by differences in upbringing and natural

endowment. On this view, inequalities in distribution should track only individuals' choices and preferences. Yet socialist equality of opportunity does not remove every inequality generated by personal conduct. Three kinds of inequality may still arise: those stemming from preference, from choice, and from sheer luck. If left unchecked, however, these differences may expand without limit, producing severe wealth polarization, destroying egalitarian and fraternal social relations, and violating socialist principles. As some scholars in the analytical Marxist tradition argue, class differentiation and the wealth inequalities that follow from it are unacceptable, because once such inequalities are accepted and dignified as justice, one effectively walks alongside evil (Guan & Jiao, 2025).

For this reason, Cohen introduces the community principle. Its function is to prevent inequality from expanding excessively, so that society can preserve room for individual choice while also maintaining equality and solidarity. Under the community principle, those with greater talents would still be willing, even in the absence of coercive rules, to work for the common good and to share their additional gains with others. People would no longer use their skills to bid one another up and extract larger benefits from one another. As one scholar succinctly puts it, a truly just society cannot rely on structural mechanisms alone; it also requires a just ethos capable of shaping the choices of social agents (Chen, 2024). Critics have asked whether Cohen's proposal places too much weight on individuals' moral self-consciousness and ignores the ubiquity of self-interest in real societies. Cohen responds that the normative reasonableness of an egalitarian ideal is not refuted by the fact that it is difficult to realize in practice. He readily admits that modern societies know how to mobilize self-interest to raise efficiency, but they do not know how to design institutions that can activate the generosity people also possess and make an economy run on that basis (Cohen, 2011a, p. 58).

The Core Differences Between Rawls and Cohen and an Assessment

Different Attitudes Toward Human Nature and Personal Motivation

The contrast between Rawls and Cohen becomes especially vivid when one considers their different attitudes toward human nature and personal motivation. Cohen dramatizes the issue by imagining a doctor who knows that an annual salary of £100,000 is available for a hospital post, but also believes that any gap between her pay and the pay of others is justified only if it compensates for the actual burdens and costs of doing the job. She then wonders how she can sincerely affirm that justice forbids inequalities harmful to the poor while at the same time demanding the full salary rather than only what is strictly needed to do the work (Cohen, 2014, pp. 63–64). The example captures the doctor’s perplexity: she wants a high income, yet she also recognizes the demands of fairness. If she accepts only the compensation necessary for the burdens of the job, it appears as though she is making a personal sacrifice. How, then, should one act when private interest and social justice pull in different directions?

Rawls’s answer is that incentives are necessary and that some inequality is acceptable. This follows from his less stringent reading of the difference principle, which allows the necessity of inequality to depend on the subjective choices of the talented (Duan, 2022). From a Rawlsian perspective, the doctor’s salary demand is indeed self-interested, but it is intelligible within real social conditions and is not excluded by the theory so long as the resulting inequality improves the position of the least advantaged. Natural talents belong in a sense to the common pool of social assets, yet material incentives may still be needed to ensure that those talents are fully exercised. Cohen, by contrast, maintains that if the doctor effectively says, “Pay me more or I will not do the work,” then her behavior amounts to a kind of extortion. He insists on a stricter reading of the difference principle according to which only inequalities grounded in

objective necessity, not in strategically chosen motives, can be justified. To use natural advantage as bargaining leverage is not a morally innocent exercise of personal choice; it is a threat directed at the collective good. In a truly just society, Cohen argues, the doctor should be motivated by the vocation to heal and by responsibility to the community. In this respect, Cohen's judgment also resonates with the Kantian test of universalizability: if the maxim "I will perform my duties only when paid a premium" were universalized, social cooperation would collapse under the weight of mutual self-interested bargaining.

The deeper disagreement concerns their different understandings of a just society. Rawls focuses on regulating conflicts of interest through institutions rather than transforming human nature itself. His project is to design rules under which even self-interested people will behave in socially beneficial ways. Cohen asks a more demanding question: if citizens do not possess a genuine sense of justice in their hearts, can a society secured only by institutions really count as just? For him, true egalitarians should work from concern, solidarity, and a willingness to share, not from a constant calculation of compensation. Society reaches justice only when the doctor no longer desires that additional income from the inside out.

The Necessity of Their Divergence: The Essential Incompatibility Between Luck

Egalitarianism and the Justificatory Community

The divergence between Rawls and Cohen is not merely a difference in perspective. It reflects a deeper opposition between the justificatory community and radical luck egalitarianism. Rawls's well-ordered society implicitly presupposes a justificatory community, that is, a society in which everyone accepts, and knows that others accept, the same principles of justice, and in which the basic institutions generally satisfy, and are generally known to satisfy, those principles

(Rawls, 2009, p. 5). This means that institutional arrangements must be capable of public justification to all, and that individual conduct must broadly accord with a shared sense of justice.

Cohen's project as a radical luck egalitarian moves in another direction. Its guiding ambition is to eliminate all involuntary disadvantage, and this ambition is in tension with the justificatory community at the level of justificatory structure itself. As Chen and Wang (2025) argue, justificatory community and luck egalitarianism adopt two different modes of justification: the former uses a second-personal mode, while the latter uses a third-personal mode. Second-person justification emphasizes mutual justification among persons: principles of justice must be acceptable in face-to-face terms to each social member, and persons stand in relations of reciprocal accountability. Third-person justification, by contrast, treats justice as an objective standard independent of interpersonal acceptance. This is precisely the logic of Cohen's luck egalitarianism. The two modes are hard to reconcile because their criteria are mutually exclusive. A justificatory community emphasizes what persons can actually accept from one another, but such intersubjective consensus may drift away from objective fairness. Luck egalitarianism emphasizes compensation in accordance with objective moral principle, but those affected may not be able to accept that principle from within their own social standpoint.

To display the contrast more clearly, Anderson (2010) famously proposes the case of Salieri and Mozart. Both love music and both work hard, but Mozart possesses extraordinary natural talent while Salieri does not. From a luck-egalitarian perspective, one may judge from an objective third-person standpoint that Salieri's resentment is not wholly groundless, because Mozart's superior gift is a matter of brute luck and such natural inequality is in one sense unfair. From the standpoint of the justificatory community, however, Salieri cannot justify his hatred to Mozart himself, because Mozart has done nothing wrong. He is simply more gifted, and to resent

an innocent person in that way violates the relation of equal respect that should hold between persons. Put simply, Cohen is concerned that people should not bear injustice because of luck, whereas Rawls attaches greater weight to public justification and shared social consensus. Their conceptions of equality are therefore theoretically incompatible, and this incompatibility brings their distinct paths sharply into focus.

Theoretical Value and Practical Implications

Theoretical Value

The comparison between Rawls and Cohen clarifies two different but complementary ways of understanding equality. In order to eliminate the deep inequalities produced by congenital and arbitrary factors, Rawls proceeds from the basic structure of society and, through the two principles of justice, seeks to improve the living conditions of the least advantaged without sacrificing equal liberty. Cohen moves further. He criticizes the tacit assumption of selfish human motivation built into Rawls's interpretation of the difference principle and argues that equality must penetrate ordinary personal choice in order to prevent vice in the private sphere from corroding just public institutions. Rawls's path is more realistic and easier to implement, but precisely because it accommodates self-interest to a greater extent, it risks permitting widening gaps that may eventually undermine the ideal of a well-ordered society. Cohen, by contrast, emphasizes that noncoercive factors such as family and social custom also shape people's prospects, and he highlights the importance of cultivating social ethos and shared commitment. In this way he both extends and, in his own view, rescues Rawls's theory of justice. Yet because his account relies heavily on the exercise of generosity, many scholars regard it as excessively idealistic. Their contrast shows that an egalitarian society needs the dual support of

institutional justice and personal choice. This expands both the content and the range of egalitarian practice.

The comparison also reveals a deeper tension internal to egalitarian theory itself. In arguing for the difference principle, Rawls hints at a justificatory community grounded in reciprocity and solidarity. At the same time, by compensating the least advantaged for inequalities rooted in talent and other natural contingencies, he also seems to adopt part of the logic of luck egalitarianism. Later studies suggest that these two commitments are difficult to sustain simultaneously: the responsibility-tracking logic of luck egalitarianism may erode the reciprocal foundation on which community depends, while a genuine justificatory community cannot fully accept a cold calculus of responsibility. Equality therefore oscillates between two different ideals—one as a mechanism of compensatory distribution and the other as a substantive ideal of social relationship. Drawing on Marx’s idea of stages of social development, Chen (2023) proposes a reconciliation: luck egalitarianism can function as the distributive principle appropriate to actual society, correcting congenital inequalities, whereas the justificatory community can be treated as a higher-stage value ideal shaping reciprocal and shared social relations. Under this interpretation, the two are not simply exclusive alternatives, but can be pursued in stages and thereby rendered partially compatible.

Practical Implications

The debate between Rawls and Cohen also offers important theoretical resources for China’s pursuit of common prosperity under conditions of high-quality development. Rawls seeks to correct the effects of natural and arbitrary factors through institutional justice, and this broadly aligns with China’s efforts to improve the distributive system and advance equalization in basic public services. Cohen’s critique, however, reminds us that even a complete institutional

framework may lose effectiveness if it lacks support at the level of social psychology and public ethos. If a society tacitly tolerates privilege, then formal equality of opportunity will be unable to translate into substantive equality of outcome. Institutional construction is therefore indispensable, but so is the removal of the invisible barriers embedded in social interaction, so that institutions can truly take effect in lived reality.

At the same time, Cohen's emphasis on the community principle prompts reflection on the way excessive material incentives may corrode social fairness. Policy design must therefore confront the problem of how to balance efficiency with equality. Common prosperity is not only an economic objective but also a condition of social relationship. It requires the cultivation of reciprocity, solidarity, and public-mindedness. As Engels once noted, the real content of the proletarian demand for equality is the abolition of class; any demand for equality that goes beyond or departs from this horizon easily becomes absurd (Marx & Engels, 2009, p. 113). This reminder suggests that China's egalitarian practice cannot simply copy Western theoretical routes. It must proceed from its own fundamental goals and, on the basis of institutional refinement and social solidarity, maintain a clear orientation toward communism.

Conclusion

This study clarifies the main division between two major theories of equality. It confirms the foundational role of institutions in underwriting justice, while also emphasizing the supplementary value of communal spirit. Justice, on this account, requires attention both to institutional guarantees and to individual choice. The comparison also shows that self-interested motivation should remain an object of vigilance. In that respect, the argument is consistent with the socialist aim of eliminating excessive inequality and may offer theoretical resources for the construction of social fairness.

Because of the scope and complexity of both Rawls's and Cohen's theories, this study has not been able to reconstruct every dimension of Cohen's egalitarian thought in a fully comprehensive way. The depth of analysis therefore remains limited in some respects. Future research may further examine the value balance between freedom and equality and explore more concrete and feasible ways of coordinating the two, thereby continuing to unfold the contemporary significance of egalitarian theory.

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