

## Jerry Cohen – an Appreciation

### I

In January 2009, Oxford marked Jerry Cohen's retirement after twenty-four years as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory with a conference on his work.<sup>1</sup> At its end Jerry recalled that, while he had faced the prospect of retirement with anxiety, now that it had actually happened he found that his attitude to it had changed. He realized, he said, that he had achieved what he had set out to do in philosophy and, as now he stood on the threshold of old age, he looked forward to the next phase of his life as a kind of harvest time. That time was to be brutally cut short less than a year later. Nevertheless, his words are a consolation, for, surely, he was right. Nothing can replace Jerry's intellectual exuberance, the incisiveness of his mind and his tenacity in pursuit of an argument, to say nothing of all the other glories of his unique and lovable personality. He has, however, left behind him an exceptional body of work, one that is animated by a deep and admirable philosophical (and moral) consistency.

Jerry arrived in Oxford in 1963 to do the B.Phil. in philosophy, having completed his first degree at McGill. He was a committed Marxist from a working-class Jewish family in Montreal and so it is perhaps slightly surprising that he had no quarrel with the

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry used the name "G.A. Cohen" professionally – an original reason for which was (or so I suspect) to avoid confusion with another "Jerry Cohen". However, after his death, the philosophy blog, Leiter Reports, carried a thread about him, from which I take the following reminiscence by a former graduate student, Rhodri Lathey:

"I also remember being in an All Souls garden party with Jerry. He warned me as we were drinking that if I addressed him as 'Professor Cohen' again, he would pour his glass of wine over me. Sure enough, and even though I was dressed in a suit in preparation for an evening engagement, I erred and he delivered his promise!"

Bearing that story in mind (as an unambiguous expression of preference, not because I fear similar retributive measures) I shall refer to Jerry as "Jerry" in what follows.

rather austere kind of analytical philosophy that was practised in Oxford at that time. This was partly, no doubt, a matter of his innate talent and temperament. He already seems to have had his extraordinary gift for precision of expression and sensitivity to differences of meaning, qualities that surely stood him in good stead with his supervisor, Gilbert Ryle. In the writings of Jerry's predecessor, Charles Taylor (another Montreal leftist) there is a sense that "there are more things in heaven and earth ... than are dreamt of in your philosophy", but Jerry was always one of those who do not want there to be more things in his philosophy than there are in heaven and earth. (As we shall see, however, Jerry's beliefs about what they contain were a good deal less restricted than those of Nelson Goodman, whose joke I just borrowed.) While at Oxford he was also taught by Isaiah Berlin and the two men formed an enduring friendship.

## II

Here is an example of the early Jerry in philosophical action. It comes from "Beliefs and Roles", an Aristotelian Society paper from 1966 (his first published paper). In the passage below, Jerry is giving his definition of a social role.

A description under which a person falls allocates him to a social role or position *in the measure that* the attribution to him of some rights and/or duties is inseparable from the application of the description UNLESS that a man falls under the description follows analytically from the fact that he is a man.

The italicized words are needed to reflect the fact that there is a continuum between what are unquestionably social roles and what are unquestionably not such. Some theisms and some political theories hold that there are rights and/or duties which appertain to men as men, so that a being lacking them could not be called a "man". In the absence of a refutation of these doctrines, the excluding condition is necessary to prevent manhood from becoming a social role.

The conditions are offered to clarify what is ordinarily understood by "occupying a role" rather than "playing a role". Hence my use of the phrase "social role or

position": one can occupy but not play a position. This eliminates irrelevancies deriving from dramaturgical contexts in which "playing the role of" is close to "pretending to be". An asylum inmate who plays the role of a general does not occupy that role. Where "playing" does not entail "occupying" roles are not to be understood in terms of rights and duties. It is also possible to occupy one's role without playing it. This can happen through a refusal or an inability to perform.<sup>2</sup>

We can see here many of Jerry's qualities as a thinker. The passage is demanding, although not for any unclarity in the writing – on the contrary, not a single word is out of place or redundant – but simply because of its detail and precision. Jerry was an incredibly quick-witted person and his first thoughts were as clear and incisive as most of us could ever hope to achieve. But he was not easily satisfied. If a counter-example or objection struck him as having the slightest merit, he absolutely refused to leave it unanswered.<sup>3</sup> His papers went through draft after draft and, as the revisions mounted, so did the complexity. He loved the "curlicues and twirly bits" of philosophy (as he put it) and would sub-divide the branches of his arguments until they became twiglets so fine that, for some of us at least, they passed beneath the threshold of perception. One can see from the long list of acknowledgements to his writings that he exposed himself readily to criticism. But Jerry's fiercest critic was always himself.

Methodologically too, the passage is quite revealing. One might almost take it as a model of how orthodox analytical philosophy was practised in Britain at that time. The definition of "social role" that I have quoted (and that he goes on to amplify, illustrate and defend later in the paper) is developed simply by close attention to nuances of linguistic usage (the distinction between "occupying" and "playing" a role, for example). The paper's central thesis is that, given a suitably precise definition of the concept of a

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<sup>2</sup> "Beliefs and Roles", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 67 (1966 - 1967), 17-34, p. 21

<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, I think that he missed a trick. As Eric Nelson pointed out to me, surely playing shortstop is "playing a position"? (Jerry was a baseball geek in his youth.)

social role, it is inconsistent to claim that one can relativize one's judgements to one's social role. The argument turns on a claim about the "logic" (in the broad sense of that term current in those days) or "grammar" of belief. The claim is that it is inconsistent to say "I believe this as a father" or "I believe this as a Catholic" – you either believe something or you don't and, although your social role may help to explain the genesis of your belief, it cannot justify it. What this all shows, Jerry concludes, is that the picture of human beings as living within a number of contending and perhaps incommensurable evaluative practices is a manifestation of a kind of alienation and he refers to Hegel's contrast between Objective and Absolute Spirit to assert the idea that the essential freedom of human beings lies in their being able to take on a vantage-point that transcends their actual social roles. The connection between the main body of his argument and these concluding remarks seems to me to be quite tenuous, but, all in all, the paper is very much what Jerry was about at that stage of his career: the employment of relatively narrow and orthodox analytical techniques in support of broadly Marxist ends.

By this time, Jerry was a member of the Philosophy Department at UCL under Richard Wollheim. UCL was a very good fit for Jerry. Wollheim (whom Jerry adored) was famously hospitable to radical and unconventional ideas provided only that they were pursued with rigour and commitment – which, of course, in Jerry's case, was beyond question. Jerry did not publish much at that time, but, before the bullying research assessment exercises and over-powerful university administrators that disfigure academic life in modern Britain, no one seems to have taken exception. To the contrary, it is clear that he was working hard – reading, teaching and thinking intensively – and

that he was appreciated for that both by colleagues and students. It was during those years at UCL, of course, that he was at work on the book that was to make his reputation: *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defence* (Oxford, 1978).

### III

To appreciate the significance of Jerry's very distinctive approach to Marxism, one needs some background about Marxism itself.

Marxism has always been three things: a (would-be) scientific theory of society, a political movement and – though often very much in the background – an ethical stance. How to understand each of these elements individually and how the three of them go together have been controversial questions since Marx's day and every serious Marxist theorist has had to offer answers. Here, for example, are the words of one all-too-influential Marxist thinker:

Dialectical materialism is the world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party. It is called dialectical materialism because its approach to the phenomena of nature, its method of studying and apprehending them, is *dialectical*, while its interpretation of the phenomena of nature, its conception of these phenomena, its theory, is *materialistic*.

Historical materialism is the extension of the principles of dialectical materialism to the study of social life, an application of the principles of dialectical materialism to the phenomena of the life of society, to the study of society and of its history.<sup>4</sup>

According to Stalin, it is dialectical materialism – a philosophical doctrine – that connects the first two elements of Marxism. Dialectical materialism underlies Marxism as a social science and acts as the guiding doctrine for the Marxist party, which, in turn, has the decisive role to play in turning the revolutionary aspirations of Marxist theory into

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<sup>4</sup> J.V. Stalin, "Dialectical and Historical Materialism" (1938).  
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1938/09.htm>, retrieved 28.5.2010

practice. As far as the third, ethical element in Marxism is concerned, however, Stalin's position is a negative one. The message of dialectical and historical materialism is simply that there are no transhistorical ethical principles. So the act of invoking such standards is always misguided, no matter whether that is done to defend existing social relations or to criticise them.

If there are no isolated phenomena in the world, if all phenomena are interconnected and interdependent, then it is clear that every social system and every social movement in history must be evaluated not from the standpoint of "eternal justice" or some other preconceived idea, as is not infrequently done by historians, but from the standpoint of the conditions which gave rise to that system or that social movement and with which they are connected.<sup>5</sup>

Such was the orthodoxy of the Soviet Communist movement.

The appearance of the New Left in the 1960s opened up debate, however. Two alternatives emerged, both of which gave a significantly different account of Marxism's claims to be a scientific theory of society. The first went back through various dissident strands in Marxism – particularly the Frankfurt School – to Georg Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness* (1920) (although Lukacs himself in later years was very much identified with communist orthodoxy). On this view, the claim of Marxism to give a scientific understanding of society rested on the fact that Marxist theory's relation to its object – society – was fundamentally unlike the relationship between object and theory to be found in the natural sciences. Instead of being part of an "external", observable and manipulable reality, society should be understood as one pole within a "subject-object" – in other words, society should be seen, ultimately, as a single agent engaged in the process of understanding and realizing itself. The proletarian movement – and, in particular, the Leninist vanguard party – were the privileged focus of this process, the

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<sup>5</sup> "Dialectical and Historical Materialism"

embodiments of its most advanced consciousness. Thus ethics too had a place within Marxism, so long as it was understood, not as a set of timeless standards for the assessment of forms of social organization, but as the normative dimension of the process of collective self-realization. Variants of this “Hegelian” form of Marxism appeared not just among anti-Stalinist Marxists in the West but also among various Eastern European dissidents – for example, in the writings of Leszek Kolakowski in Poland and the Praxis Group in Yugoslavia.

The New Left found the subservient politics of the pro-Soviet Communist Parties as repellent as it found their “dialectical materialism” intellectually crude. But it was out of the Communist movement that a second alternative approach to Marxism emerged. In a series of appallingly obscure writings in the mid- to late sixties, Louis Althusser, a Party member who taught at the *École Normale Supérieure*, presented a novel account of Marxist social theory. For Althusser, Marxism’s claims to be scientific lay in the fact that it had emancipated itself from philosophy. So the question whether the philosophical framework for Marxism should be some form of Marxist Hegelianism or orthodox “DiaMat” was beside the point. Although the idea that science can get by quite well without any epistemological or metaphysical guidance from philosophy sounds like positivism, Althusser’s form of it was actually very different. Where the positivists thought that all sound science shared a single structure (while arguing amongst themselves, of course, about what that was!) for the Althusserians (influenced particularly by the French historian of science, Georges Canguilhem) what made a science scientific was the fact that it succeeded in “constituting” its own particular and distinctive set of objects and methods. Althusser claimed to be able to trace such an

“epistemological breakthrough” in Marx’s work between the Paris Manuscripts of 1844 and *Das Kapital* (of which the first volume was published in 1867).

All of this set the scene for various strident debates that took place in journals such as *New Left Review*, *Radical Philosophy*, *Telos*, *Theoretical Practice* – to say nothing of countless Marxist “Reading Groups” and “Study Circles”. Jerry, however – though he could be a fierce controversialist – took little part in all of this zealotry. I never discussed that stage of his intellectual and political development with him but my guess (and I must emphasize that it is a guess) is that the reasons may be as follows.

Jerry’s background was in the world of Moscow-line communism – a tough and beleaguered environment to grow up in in North America during the Cold War era – and, in his youth, he did not question the official party line. In *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?*, for example, he recalls that he accepted that the Soviet invasion of Hungary was the justified suppression of a fascist insurrection (he would have been fifteen at the time). It was only the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, he writes, “which thoroughly rid me of my pro-Sovietism”.<sup>6</sup> But even then, I think, he was too much of a loyalist to make the kind of noisy break with the Party that the historian, E.P. Thompson (and many others) had done. Moreover, however much the Western Communist Parties had been compromised by their association with the Soviet Union, it could be argued that the main task of Marxists in the West was to oppose the exploitation and oppression of capitalism and this would hardly be helped by internal conflict on the Left. Finally, of course, his own ideas were still in development and, as explained earlier, Jerry absolutely refused to put anything into the public domain until he was satisfied with it.

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<sup>6</sup> *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), p.188



#### IV

So much for speculation. What is certainly the case is that when *Karl Marx's Theory of History* was published those who read it with some knowledge of the state of current debate saw immediately that it was unique in style, method and substance. As for style, Jerry was absolutely scrupulous in making distinctions, identifying premises and defining terms. Now there may seem nothing particularly original about this (and indeed there isn't) but anyone who has studied the writings of Lukacs and Althusser or their British epigones – I name no names – will know that these were not virtues to be taken for granted in writing about Marxism at that time. Methodologically, the most striking feature of *Karl Marx's Theory of History* is a negative one, although no less important for that: at no point does Jerry make use of (or attribute to Marx the use of) any distinctive, “dialectical” method. But it was on the level of substance that the book was most original.

In its account of social reality, Marxism asserts the fundamental explanatory importance of certain collective structures and social relations (most obviously, “class” and, in *Das Kapital*, capital itself) that transcend the consciousnesses (and often conflict with the immediate interests) of individual agents in society. For the Marxist Hegelians these items were to be comprehended from the vantage-point of some materialized version of the Hegelian doctrine of *Geist*, while the Althusserians appealed to a notion of “structural causality” which was supposed (although it was never clear to me quite how) to allow such phenomena to figure in scientific explanation without requiring the use of the kind of teleological perspective associated with their “Hegelian” antagonists. But both

sides agreed on this much: such entities were an essential part of social explanation and for that reason Marxism could never be a kind of individualistic “social physics”.

It is here that the radicalism of Jerry’s interpretation made itself apparent. A supra-individual dimension could be allowed into Marxist social theory, he argued, through the use of functional explanations, without thereby pre-supposing the active powers of strange collective agents or “generative structures” – indeed, without making any ontological or methodological assumptions that a natural scientist should find shocking. Functional explanations were, after all, a common feature of Darwinian evolutionary theory, a model for Jerry (as indeed for Marx) of a well-established and supported scientific theory. Thus there was no reason, or so he argued, for Marxism to be regarded as any less scientifically respectable than Darwinism.

*Karl Marx’s Theory of History* is an immensely rich and detailed work and those details have been the subject of intense, often scholastic (or perhaps, in deference to Jerry’s strongly felt Jewish roots, I should say “Talmudic”) scrutiny. But the *defence* it gives of Marxism is principally philosophical – that is, it responds to various objections (for example, that the “base” cannot be distinguished from the “superstructure”, or to the use of functional explanations in social science) that seek to disqualify Marxism on *a priori*, conceptual grounds. Yet, even accepting that those responses are successful, a question remains – the simplest but most fundamental one that we can ask of any would-be scientific theory: does it match the way that reality is? This question becomes the more pressing when we consider the course of history in the thirty years or so since the book’s publication. How could anyone with their eyes open still believe that the development of the productive forces of society under capitalism leads inevitably to

capitalism's demise and its replacement with socialism? It is a point which Jerry, however regretfully, accepted. How then would he react? Would he abandon his radical political convictions along with the empirical theory that had been associated with them? He did not, and the reasons that he did not reveal something deep (and perhaps unexpected) about Jerry's thought.

## V

Undeniably, Marxism asserts some very strong and distinctive ethical claims. Marxists consistently condemn capitalism as oppressive, exploitative and – above all – unjust. And yet Marxists (going back to and including Marx himself) have usually been extremely hostile to any suggestion that their actions are the product of commitment to a set of moral values. The complex reasons for this were presented by Jerry himself with wonderful clarity in *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (see particularly Lecture 6). As he writes there:

Classical Marxists believed that material equality, equality of access to goods and services, was both historically inevitable and morally right. They believed the first entirely consciously, and they believed the second more or less consciously, and exhibited more or less evasion when asked whether they believed it.<sup>7</sup>

So long as such values could be contained within Marxism's "carapace", its "hard shell of supposed fact", there was, as Jerry points out, no need to expose them to the daylight – why bother with ideals when history was obviously on your side?

He is absolutely right about this, in my view, but he doesn't, I think, go far enough. For it is not just that the historical theses of Marxism make ideals redundant; they also appear to lend strong support to – perhaps even make mandatory – a form of

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<sup>7</sup> *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, p.103

meta-ethical scepticism. If it is true that moral beliefs are the expression of material interests or the products of particular, transient class societies (two not quite equivalent claims that both appear frequently in Marxism) then how can one sincerely give morality the force that we normally think of it as having – that is, as something that should carry weight with us independent of our interests and inclinations? I am a modern person living in bourgeois society, the Marxist might say, so, of course, I believe that slavery is wrong. Indeed, I can't even conceive what it would be like not to believe that it was wrong and I'm very glad that I can't. But, as someone who also believes in the social determination of ideas, I have to recognize that, had I lived under other circumstances, I would inevitably have thought something different – quite possibly something I now find morally repellent – with equal conviction. How then can I put any weight on my moral ideals? If Marxism is true as a theory of history then, fortunately, I do not have to face that problem. My subjective conviction regarding the wrongness of capitalism will be vindicated, not by its correspondence to some eternal moral fact, but by having history on its side.

I emphasize this connection between the Marxist belief in the social determination of ideas and meta-ethical scepticism for two reasons. First, historicist scepticism about morality seems to have a very deep appeal to many people and, indeed, to have survived the demise of Marxism as a theory of history (it is a familiar motif in post-modernism, for example, although usually it is supported there by some mishmash of ideas from Nietzsche and psychoanalysis rather than Marx). Secondly, it was an aspect of Marxism towards which Jerry himself never felt in the slightest attracted. Quite the contrary. How

far Jerry was from being a meta-ethical sceptic would become ever clearer in the course of the second half of his philosophical career.

## VI

There was some surprise when Jerry returned to Oxford as Chichele Professor in 1985. Those who raised their eyebrows at the idea of a Marxist at All Souls should have remembered that the very first holder of the Chichele chair, G.D.H. Cole, was an enthusiastic and active socialist. More seriously, though, there was a question about the focus of Jerry's work. By that time, political philosophy was no longer the intellectual backwater that it had been in the 1960s. The explosion of energy and ideas that followed the publication of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974) was evident to all. Would the appointment of someone whose work hitherto had been in such a different direction help Oxford to be part of that? As we now know, the answer was – triumphantly – “yes”. Thanks in large part to Jerry (although also to Ronald Dworkin, David Miller, Derek Parfit, Joseph Raz, Amartya Sen, Bernard Williams – and many others) his time as Chichele Professor saw Oxford become a centre of activity in political philosophy, normative ethics and legal philosophy to rival Harvard.

Jerry continued to pursue further refinements of Marxism during the nineteen-eighties. At the same time, however, he also started to engage with the major figures in contemporary normative political theory. He was a master of what Marxists call “immanent critique” – the attempt to hold theories to account by measuring them by their own standards and values – and his journal articles and lectures from that time are a series of self-standing contributions of great forcefulness and analytical depth. Reading

those pieces, one might be forgiven, however, for wondering whether Jerry had a worked-out, comprehensive position of his own to advance. He did indeed. Although some of its foundational elements only became fully explicit in *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (2008), published at the end of his career, they were there, I suspect, all along.

At the heart of Jerry's position are three main ideas. First, and most familiarly, there is egalitarianism. Egalitarianism takes many forms, of course, but Jerry presents his understanding of it with characteristic precision and succinctness in *Rescuing Justice and Equality*:

... my own animating conviction in political philosophy with respect to justice is a conviction about distributive justice in particular. It is that an unequal distribution whose inequality cannot be vindicated by some choice or fault or desert on the part of (some of) the relevant affected agents is unfair, and therefore, *pro tanto*, unjust ...<sup>8</sup>

The fundamental thought is that, as he says later, “justice opposes differences of fortune between people that are due to morally arbitrary causes, because they are unfair.”<sup>9</sup> Thus it embodies “[the] post-medieval principle that none should fare worse than others through no fault of their own.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet behind this modern philosophical understanding of justice there stands a second, much older view about justice's status. As Jerry explains, “The ‘lovers of sights and sounds’ in Book V of Plato's *Republic* think it suffices for saying what justice is to say what counts as just within the world of sights and sounds. They scarcely recognize the question, What is justice, *as such*?” Against this, however, “Plato thinks, and I agree, that you need to have a view of what justice *itself* is to recognize that justice dictates *P* when *F* is true. That is how justice transcends the facts of the world.” Moreover, he goes

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<sup>8</sup> *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, p. 7

<sup>9</sup> *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, p. 156

<sup>10</sup> *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, p. 156

on: “I also happen to agree with Plato that justice is the self-same thing across, and independently of, history.”<sup>11</sup> “Justice”, Jerry liked to say, “just is.”

Jerry’s moral realism also included the idea that non-human things could be valuable without being valuable *for* human beings. He endorsed the position, familiar from Moore’s *Principia Ethica*, that works of art are valuable for human beings precisely because works of art are valuable in themselves, independently of human beings. Thus he did not accept the “person-affecting principle” that has seemed no more than common sense to many contemporary political philosophers. It is rare indeed to find such extreme moral realism among analytical philosophers and I would guess that, among Marxists, it is unique. No wonder Jerry had so little sympathy for the constructivists and their agonized attempts to find a middle path between subjectivism and “rational intuitionism”!<sup>12</sup>

But if Jerry, like Plato, was an extreme moral realist, he did not share Plato’s value monism. On the contrary, my third point is that, as far as values in general go, he saw himself as a “radical pluralist”. For Jerry, no less than for his teacher, Isaiah Berlin, there exist different incompatible values that cannot be brought together by a single, overarching moral theory. Should we succeed in transcending the world of the senses and entering the timeless realm of values, we shouldn’t expect to be greeted by concord and harmony. Rather, we will find different values competing, like the goddesses of Olympus, for our favour:

We expect to find ... as we approach the completion of our task, that the normative requirements that we recognize present themselves in competitive array: they cannot all be satisfied all the time, nor do we have a method for

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<sup>11</sup> *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, p. 291

<sup>12</sup> Apart from *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, see also Jerry’s brilliant response to Christine Korsgaard’s Tanner Lectures, published in C. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge, 1996)

systematically combining them. Discursively indefensible trade-offs are our fate. I do not say that such an intellectual predicament is satisfactory. But I do say that it is the predicament we are in. There are many attempts to escape it in the literature, and as many failures to do so.<sup>13</sup>

## VII

I reviewed *Rescuing Justice and Equality* for the *TLS*. I wrote the review in the early summer of 2009 and, once I had finished, I e-mailed Jerry and asked if he would like to see a copy in advance of publication (how glad I am that I did!) When he had read it he wrote back (gratifyingly) that he had liked it a lot – and where should he send the notes he had made explaining why he didn't agree with me? One of his comments has stayed with me. Towards the end of the review is the following paragraph about Jerry's "luck egalitarianism".

If we take Cohen's conception seriously though, the contingent and unchosen (and hence morally arbitrary) fact that people happen to find themselves in a relationship of fellow-citizenship to one another should play no morally relevant role. From which it follows, so far as I can see, that everything that is contingent about us in relation to other moral beings is potentially a matter of distributive injustice between us. The beautiful Cinderella (once that little business of having to stay at home to clean the house instead of going to the ball is sorted out) owes compensation to the ugly sisters. Australia (which is somewhat wealthier than New Zealand) would have a duty to re-distribute towards New Zealand to the extent that the inequalities between them are a matter of luck rather than choice. This is not because of anything unjust in their dealings with one another; they don't in fact need to have any dealings with one another at all for the morally arbitrary difference on which the distributive claim is founded to arise. Luck egalitarianism is thus an extremely ambitious project and it clearly isn't going to appeal to everyone. For my part, I think that evening out the general arbitrariness of fortune might be a requirement to place on a just God, but it is not a requirement of human justice. As my father said (yours too, probably), "life isn't fair" – but the fact that it is not fair only becomes unjust under particular circumstances.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, p.4

<sup>14</sup> "Sensible, but is it just?" (review of G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*) *T.L.S.*, 21 August 2009, pp. 29-30



He had sidelined this paragraph in the black fountain-pen ink that his friends are all familiar with and written the following. “I now [double underlining] agree with this. But it does not affect my criticism of Rawls.” I was to see Jerry once more before he died (we had lunch on the day that he had his stroke) but we didn’t talk about what he had meant. I wish we had, because it seems to me that the issue goes deep into Jerry’s thought.

To say that the luck-egalitarian conception of justice embodies a “Gods-eye-view” of things isn’t supposed to be disparaging or to suggest that Jerry had abandoned earlier, secular commitments. Many of the things that secular egalitarians believe (most obviously, the idea that all human beings, just by being human, have intrinsic value and hence certain basic rights in common) clearly have religious origins. Although their defence may be more difficult without those underpinnings, that by no means shows that they have to be given up. Kant, for example, believed that, if God is just, he will punish human beings only for what is truly within their own control (that is, that are matters of free choice). The “highest good” is for happiness to be appropriately proportional to desert. Kant himself connects this conception of divine justice with the idea that human history should be seen as a progressive movement towards the realization of justice on earth. To the extent that Marxian socialism inherits the aspiration for the universal realization of justice in history (and Jerry certainly saw it that way) then the thought that Jerry’s ideas about justice had religious roots seems to me obviously true.

Jerry himself was thinking about such issues towards the end of his life, encouraged perhaps by the happy event of his being invited to deliver the Gifford Lectures (lectures which were endowed by Lord Gifford to promote “the knowledge of God”) in 1996. Jerry’s Gifford Lectures became *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come*

*You're So Rich?*, by far his most accessible and endearing work – anyone looking for a “Jerry Cohen for Beginners” should read it. If what I have written so far depicts someone of uncompromisingly radical views with an appetite for rigorous detail and trenchant polemic, that picture would be accurate. But, if one were to infer that such a person must be dry, narrow or unsympathetic, nothing could be further from the truth. Jerry was in many ways the most serious and intense of philosophers, but he was also the most personal and humorous. His friends knew that each was an equally essential aspect of his character. Those who did not have the good fortune to know him can get some idea of how they went together from *If You're an Egalitarian*.

## VIII

At the end of his retirement conference, Jerry did not reply to his critics. Instead he read some poetry. Jerry loved poetry and he had an enviable memory for it (as he did for music and song) but the poetry he read that day must have surprised his audience. It came, he explained, from the book that had been used at his Montreal high school in the 1950s – *Modern Poems for Modern Youth*. Of course, at that time Jerry was a faithful Moscow-line young communist and so you might expect him to have been taken by poetry with an anti-imperialist or anti-capitalist dimension – Wilfred Owen’s war poetry, perhaps, or *The Waste Land*. Jerry certainly appreciated Eliot and other modernist poets (perhaps surprisingly, he was a great enthusiast for ee cummings) but the poems he recited first were by that quintessence of establishment Victorianism, Henry Newbolt. Unlikely though it may seem, the young Jerry found Newbolt’s thumping metre and assertive imperialist sentiments stirring. As he said, although his intellectual allegiance to

socialist principles made him shrink from the message of Newbolt's poems, nevertheless "my errant heart was drawn forward by their celebration of sacrifice and of virtue in community with others in the service of a noble cause". He read *Vitai Lampada* (the one with the "breathless hush in the Close to-night") and *Clifton Chapel*, following with Arthur Hugh Clough's *Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth* and, finally, Tennyson's *Ulysses*.

Why did Jerry want to read those poems? There was, he said, "no reason – I just want to". But of course there was a reason, even if he himself might not have been fully aware of it, and my conjecture is that it was this. I interpret Jerry reading those poems (all of them, in different ways, celebrations of steadfastness) as itself an act of loyalty – a modest and self-mocking assertion of loyalty to his former self. Yes, the adolescent whom he was thereby recalling had sometimes been mistaken (much more seriously so, I should say, in his political endorsement of the Soviet Union than in any susceptibility to Victorian martial poetry). But what lay behind any such mistakes was not just naivety and dogmatism. They also embodied generous and noble impulses that Jerry by no means wished to disown. The willingness to expose his ideals to critical scrutiny but not to lose faith in them ran through Jerry's philosophical career and gave meaning to it – as it did to his life.

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