

Original Paper

Comparative Analysis of Rawls's and Cohen's Principles of Justice

Ziteng Wang¹

¹ School of Philosophy, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China

Received: September 2, 2025 Accepted: September 23, 2025 Online Published: October 12, 2025
doi:10.22158/jrph.v8n2p87 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jrph.v8n2p87>

Abstract

As highly influential contemporary political philosophers, John Rawls and G.A. Cohen have each developed distinct principles of justice centered on distributive justice. Rawls, grounded in a liberalist standpoint, focuses on the basic structure of society and follows a constructivist theoretical approach. This leads to a principle of justice concerned with the design of social order, presenting as a regulatory rule, and attempts to construct a procedure for justice. In contrast, Cohen, rooted in a socialist standpoint, emphasizes individual choices and adheres to an intuitionist theoretical approach. Consequently, his principle of justice focuses on egalitarian relations between people, manifests as a fundamental principle, and seeks to establish a ethos of justice. Both philosophies demonstrate a concern for disadvantaged groups, yet they share characteristics of abstraction and limitation due to their detachment from concrete socio-historical conditions. A thorough critical reflection on the theoretical differences between Rawls and Cohen, and a summary of the strengths and limitations of their respective principles of justice, hold significant reference value for exploring practical pathways to achieving fairness and justice.

Keywords

Rawls, Cohen, justice, principles of justice

John Rawls and G.A. Cohen (hereafter referred to as Rawls and Cohen respectively) are highly renowned contemporary political philosophers. Rawls's work *A Theory of Justice* has been acclaimed as “the most important theoretical work in ethics and political philosophy since World War II”. It brought the discussion of justice into a modern context, focusing the debate on the theme of “social justice”. From a socialist standpoint, Cohen launched a fierce critique of Rawls's conception of justice and, using Rawls's principles of justice as a counterpoint, proposed what he considered to be principles of justice suitable for socialism. The intellectual confrontation between Rawls and Cohen has garnered

widespread attention in academia. While most domestic scholars have focused on Cohen's critique of Rawls or examined these two theories of justice from a Marxist perspective, few have conducted a comparative study of the principles of justice proposed by these two thinkers. Conducting a comparative study of the principles of justice proposed by Rawls and Cohen not only allows for a deeper exploration of the intrinsic connections between these two theories of justice, but also provides theoretical reference and inspiration for exploring practical pathways to the realization of justice.

1. Rawls' Principles of Justice

The principles of justice, as the core content of *A Theory of Justice*, originate from Rawls's critique of the utilitarian conception of justice. The principles of justice proposed by Rawls consist of two sub-principles. The first is the "Equal Liberty Principle", and the second is a combined principle comprising the "Difference Principle" and the "Fair Equality of Opportunity Principle". The establishment of Rawls's principles of justice relies on the hypothetical scenario of the "original position". These principles aim to achieve a form of equality, a tendency that is concretely reflected in Rawls's interpretation of the Difference Principle. The realization of justice, in turn, depends on the procedural mechanism of Rawls's principles of justice.

1.1 Critique of the Utilitarian View of Justice: The Emergence of Rawls's Principles

Rawls's concern with the issue of principles of justice stemmed from his dissatisfaction with the utilitarian conception of justice that prevailed in the United States at the time. The utilitarian view of justice exhibits characteristics of teleology. Right and good are two core concepts in ethics, and the structure of ethical theories is determined by the definitions of these two concepts and their interrelationship. From a teleological perspective, the good is independent of the right, and the right is that which maximizes the good. The good pursued by utilitarianism is the greatest net balance for society, and justice, accordingly, is the increase in this greatest net balance. The utilitarian arrangement of the relationship between the right and the good is based on the principle of individual choice: just as individuals can weigh advantages and disadvantages to make choices that serve their maximum interests, so too can a society composed of individuals. Rawls believed that the utilitarian view of justice has three problems: First, utilitarianism denies the inviolability of natural rights held by members of society. Second, utilitarianism extends the principle of individual choice to a social principle, but since society is composed of numerous individuals with diverse goals, this extension lacks justification. Third, as a form of teleology, utilitarianism oversimplifies the relationship between the right and the good. Considering these three points, it becomes clear that while pursuing the greatest net balance, utilitarianism tacitly permits violations of individual freedoms and rights, as well as actions that harm the interests of minorities in the pursuit of the greatest good. This results in a principle of justice that contradicts common-sense norms of justice.

To eliminate the various drawbacks of the utilitarian view of justice, Rawls, based on contractarianism, proposed his own conception of justice: "All social values... are to be distributed equally unless an

unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone's advantage.” (Rawls, 1988, p. 62) The social values Rawls refers to are the social primary goods, which include rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth. Rawls believed that this conception of justice itself is the aim of the original contract; it safeguards individual liberty and rights and establishes the priority of the right over the good. Rawls refined the above proposition into two principles: the “equal liberty principle” and the principle combining the “fair equality of opportunity principle” with the “difference principle”. The “equal liberty principle”, closely related to political rights and associated issues, requires that “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all” (Rawls, 1988, pp. 60-61). This principle essentially states that social institutions must guarantee citizens the most extensive basic liberties possible, and within this framework, the extent of each person's liberty is equal. The second principle addresses issues related to the distribution of social wealth and requires that social and economic inequalities are arranged so that they are both: “(a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity” (Rawls, 1988, p. 84). This principle comprises the “difference principle” and the “fair equality of opportunity principle”. The former focuses on the interests of the least advantaged, primarily applied in the social and economic spheres, while the latter ensures the openness of offices and positions to all.

1.2 The “Original Position”—A Hypothetical Scenario for Rawls's Principles of Justice

According to Rawls, the principles of justice are the objective of an original contract, and reaching this contract requires an appropriately defined initial situation. Rawls argues that this appropriate situation is precisely the original position. The parties in the original position are equal moral persons, and the outcome of their choice is not determined by contingent factors or the relative balance of social forces. Consequently, any agreement reached in this situation is fair. The characteristics of the original position are concentrated in four key aspects: the circumstances of justice, the formal constraints of the concept of right, the veil of ignorance, and the rationality of the contracting parties.

The circumstances of justice comprise both objective and subjective aspects. Objectively, resources are characterized by moderate scarcity. Subjectively, individuals take no interest in each other's interests, a concept described as “mutual disinterest”. The objective circumstances are one of moderate scarcity because conditions of extreme abundance would render social cooperation superfluous, while conditions that are overly harsh or perilous would tend to cause social cooperation to fail. In an environment of moderate scarcity, individuals can create a better life through cooperation with others; thus, people's interests are aligned. However, social cooperation generates significant benefits, and everyone desires a larger share, leading to conflicts of interest between individuals. Against this backdrop of both aligned and conflicting interests, people in this environment need to select principles to guide the distribution of benefits.

To ensure that people in the original position select appropriate principles of justice, Rawls imposes formal constraints on the concept of right, which is the object of their choice. This means that the

principles chosen must possess the following characteristics: first, the principles must be general in form; second, they must be universal in application; third, principles are chosen to serve as the basis for a public conception of justice; fourth, these principles must be capable of ordering conflicting claims; and fifth, the outcome of applying the principles must be recognized as final and binding. With these constraints in place, principles of egoism are effectively ruled out: the requirement of generality excludes principles that are tailored to specific individuals or situations, while the requirement for an ordering provides a framework for adjudicating between different and competing demands, thereby assigning them their respective priority.

Rawls proposed the “veil of ignorance” to shield individuals in the original position from the influence of contingent factors. The veil of ignorance functions essentially as an information filter. It requires the blocking of specific knowledge about oneself and others, including information about one's own generation or the particular circumstances of their society. However, the veil of ignorance does not block all information. Individuals behind it know general facts about human society; they understand that their task is to select principles of justice for the citizens they represent; and they possess knowledge of moral powers, often described as the “rational” and the “reasonable”. Under the veil of ignorance, people in the original position, motivated by their desire for primary goods (things every rational person is presumed to want), make choices concerning the distribution of these goods. The outcome reached through unanimous agreement under these conditions is considered a just result.

Rawls stipulates the nature of the persons in the original position as rational persons. He elaborates on this rationality in three key aspects: First, a rational individual has a consistent set of preferences regarding the objects of choice, meaning that people will make choices intended to achieve their ends as effectively as possible. Second, rational persons are mutually disinterested; they are not motivated by envy to harm the interests of others, nor by intimate attachments to confer benefits upon others. Third, the parties are presumed to be strictly compliant; meaning that the principles chosen in the original position will be adhered to strictly and in good faith, ensuring the resulting agreement is upheld fully and justly.

In the hypothetical scenario of the original position, individuals would be more inclined to choose the two principles of justice proposed by Rawls rather than the principle of utilitarianism. This is because Rawls's two principles protect people's basic rights and, through the “difference principle”, help to guard against the worst possible outcomes, particularly for the least advantaged members of society.

1.3 Just Procedures: The Operational Mechanism of Rawls's Principles of Justice

Rawls argued that the advantages of the better-off are largely dependent on fortunate family backgrounds and social circumstances, conditions which should be managed as a form of common asset. Rawls proposed his principles of justice with the aim of achieving a certain equality, and his specific target was precisely the inequality in these initial conditions. The egalitarian tendency of the principles of justice is centrally embodied in the three explanations. Rawls provides for the difference principle. The first explanation is that the difference principle is not a principle of compensation. It

does not require society to remove the obstacles presented by disparities in natural talent and social status. However, the difference principle can achieve a compensatory effect: the favorable conditions of the better-off, such as their social status and innate talents, are treated as common assets. The difference principle makes overall arrangements and rational use of these conditions to benefit the least advantaged. The second explanation demonstrates the reciprocity of the difference principle. It promotes the formation of a system of social cooperation characterized by two points: 1) an individual's welfare is closely linked to this cooperative system, which is a prerequisite for attaining a satisfactory life; and 2) cooperation between individuals is only possible if this system operates under fair terms. Based on this system of social cooperation, a connection is established between the better-off and the least advantaged. The gains of the better-off simultaneously improve the situation of the less fortunate, thus establishing a relationship of reciprocity. The third explanation links the difference principle to the principle of fraternity. Rawls believed that fraternity expresses certain attitudes of mind and types of conduct, and the difference principle can be interpreted as the following proposition: "One should not desire a greater share of benefits unless it is to the advantage of those who are the least advantaged." (Rawls, 1988, pp. 105-106) This gives the difference principle a meaning that corresponds to a natural sense of fraternity. Through these three explanations, Rawls clarifies how the difference principle works to mitigate inequalities arising from arbitrary contingencies. Simultaneously, by means of these explanations, he links his principles of justice to bourgeois values: the principle of equal liberty corresponds to liberty; the principle of fair equality of opportunity corresponds to equality; and the difference principle corresponds to fraternity.

The tendency towards equality is the goal of proposing justice, and the true realization of justice is inseparable from the application of the principles of justice. As mentioned before, the two principles of justice proposed by Rawls are not parallel; these two principles, along with the two sub-principles contained within the second principle, follow a "lexical order". For this, Rawls proposes two priority rules. The first priority rule establishes the priority of liberty. "Liberty can be restricted only for the sake of liberty itself." (Rawls, 1988, pp. 302-303) This encompasses two situations: (1) any restriction on liberty must strengthen the total system of liberties shared by all citizens; and (2) if a liberty is less extensive, this inequality must be acceptable to those citizens with lesser liberty. The first principle can only be restricted for its own sake; inequalities of liberty are only justified if they improve the situation of those with lesser liberty. The second priority rule establishes the priority of justice over efficiency and welfare. It also includes two aspects: (1) inequalities of opportunity must be arranged to increase the opportunities of the least advantaged; and (2) an excessive rate (Note 1) of savings would impose burdens on some, so its setting must take into account the alleviation of these burdens. These two rules dictate the "lexical order" of the principles of justice, giving the principles a procedural character: the first principle of justice is prior to the second principle; and within the second principle, the fair equality of opportunity principle is prior to the difference principle.

The application of the principles of justice ultimately targets the basic structure of society, a process comprising four distinct stages, with the establishment of the principles of justice itself being only the first stage. The second stage is constitution-making: “A just constitution is a just procedure designed to ensure a just outcome.” (Rawls, 1988, p. 195) This procedure constitutes the political process regulated by the constitution, and the principles of justice serve as the standard for designing this procedure and determining its optimal arrangement. The third stage is legislation, where laws, regulations, and social policies must not only satisfy the principles of justice but also adhere to the various constraints stipulated by the constitution. The fourth stage is application, wherein judges and administrative officials apply the established rules to specific cases, and citizens generally comply with these norms. This four-stage sequence delineates the process through which the principles of justice operate.

Through the aforementioned arrangements, Rawls constructed a series of social institutions based on his principles of justice. However, Rawls's theory of justice has proven unsatisfactory and has consequently been subjected to numerous criticisms. G.A. Cohen stands as one of the critics of Rawlsian principles of justice, and countering Rawls's framework, he proposes an alternative conception of justice grounded in a socialist perspective.

2. Cohen's Principles of Justice

Cohen identifies a fundamental contradiction within Rawls's principles of justice and uses this as the starting point for his critique. Building on this criticism, Cohen advances an egalitarian claim—“equal access to advantage”—and develops it into his own principle of justice. When formulating his principle of justice, Cohen similarly employs the method of a hypothetical scenario. Unlike Rawls, however, the scenario he constructs—the “camping trip”—is a reflection of real social life. Its purpose is to reveal the conflicts of interest inherent in actual societal contexts. While Rawls places his hope for realizing justice in the basic structure of society, Cohen argues that relying solely on the basic structure is insufficient. The achievement of justice, in his view, also requires the cultivation of a social ethos of justice.

2.1 “Rescuing Justice and Equality” — The Emergence of Cohen's Principles of Justice

Cohen argues that Rawls's difference principle effectively condones inequality, and that the constructivist approach Rawls follows undermines the status of justice. Cohen seeks to rescue justice and equality precisely from these two aspects.

As discussed, Rawls believed that the favorable conditions of the more advantaged are not something they deserve. Cohen identifies this assertion as essentially a claim of “moral arbitrariness”: a person's possession of social status and natural talents is a matter of contingency. This claim emphasizes that individuals should not benefit from these contingencies. Consequently, inequalities arising from such contingencies require attention and rectification. However, Cohen points out a particular formulation within Rawls's difference principle: it can be interpreted as aiming to “maximize the welfare of the better-off representative individual for the equal welfare of the (N-1) preceding representative

individuals.” (Rawls, 2009, p. 64) Cohen argues that this formulation effectively grants an incentive to the better-off. It allows them to leverage their arbitrarily acquired favorable conditions for personal gain, which ultimately contradicts the core intuition of the “moral arbitrariness” claim. The principle, in this reading, permits inequalities that the initial moral arbitrariness premise was meant to rule out as unjust. Furthermore, Cohen argues that the theory of justice derived through Rawls's constructivist approach undermines the very status of justice itself. On the one hand, this theoretical path presents the principles of justice in the form of regulative rules rather than fundamental principles. Rawls's constructivism employs a proceduralized practical reason to construct and justify principles of justice without relying on metaphysics or moral realism. Compared to a concern for the nature of justice itself, this approach is more focused on practical outcomes, thereby causing the principles of justice to appear as a set of regulative rules for society rather than fundamental moral principles. On the other hand, this approach endows justice with a fact-sensitivity, meaning that justice must satisfy criteria such as Pareto optimality (Note 2), publicity, and stability, thereby subordinating justice to other values. However, justice itself, in Cohen's view, has no inherent connection to these values:

- (1) The constructivist requirement for a Pareto improvement relative to equal distribution weakens the level of distributive justice, as it leads people to make decisions based on benefit rather than justice.
- (2) Constructivism insists that justice needs to be “publicly visible” and assured by the public to guarantee publicity, yet some forms of justice, such as the lawful punishment of a guilty person, may exist or be justified even outside the realm of public acknowledgment.
- (3) Stability is essentially a value desired for regulative rules, not a requirement of justice itself. Justice does not necessarily have to be stable in the way that rules for managing a society do.

Based on the critiques outlined above, Cohen sought to explore a distinct egalitarian claim. After comprehensively examining the three existing proposals—namely, Ronald Dworkin's “equality of resources”, Richard Arneson's “equality of opportunity for welfare”, and Amartya Sen's “equality of capabilities”—Cohen advanced his own proposition: “equal access to advantage”. The term “advantage” refers to a broader and more heterogeneous collection than either “resources” or “welfare” alone. It encompasses resources, welfare, the satisfaction of needs, and other desirable states. An increase in a person's advantage signifies an improvement in their actual condition, not merely a favorable standing in comparison to others. The term “access” emphasizes the actual possession of a desirable state by an individual. This encompasses not only opportunities but also states that are directly provided by external factors without the individual needing to exercise any personal capacity to acquire them. A prime example would be the state of not contracting a disease due to effective public health measures. Conceptually, “access to advantage” correlates with the “elimination of disadvantage”. From this perspective, Cohen argues that the fundamental aim of egalitarianism is to eliminate involuntary disadvantages—those disadvantages for which the individual cannot reasonably be held responsible.

Based on the aforementioned egalitarian claims, Cohen proposed his principles of justice, which include the principle of equality and the principle of community (or sharing). Cohen's principle of equality is a principle of socialist equality of opportunity, which aims to "correct all involuntary disadvantages, that is, those disadvantages for which the agent cannot reasonably be held responsible, whether they reflect social misfortunes or natural misfortunes" (Cohen, 2011, p. 27). However, even under conditions of socialist equality of opportunity, disparities between individuals can still widen due to factors like luck (e.g., differential option luck) and ultimately lead to undesirable consequences. Therefore, Cohen introduces the principle of community to compensate for the shortcomings of the equality principle. This principle encompasses two modes of concern: the first mode involves the "restraint of complaint" by the fortunate, and the second mode involves "communal reciprocity". "Restraint of complaint" means that when the better-off, due to contingent circumstances, find themselves in the same situation as the least advantaged, they should not voice complaints. These circumstances can relate to social background or personal abilities. "Communal reciprocity" stands in sharp contrast to market reciprocity: market reciprocity is based on cash repayment, whereas communal reciprocity is founded on mutual need among people and is an anti-market principle.

2.2 The Camping Trip: The Hypothetical Scenario for Cohen's Principles of Justice

Cohen's principles of justice were proposed within the hypothetical scenario of the "camping trip". The camping trip serves as a microcosm of social life, where individuals encounter various forms of cooperation and conflict. Consequently, principles of justice are needed to guide cooperation and resolve these conflicts.

Participants in the camping trip bring their personal belongings, and there are no hierarchical differences among them. Cooperation is based on a consensus that everyone has roughly equal opportunities to utilize their talents or relax, yet each person is expected to contribute in accordance with their abilities. Cohen argues that individuals in this scenario prefer to hold all personal items under collective control and organize labor collaboratively according to their shared will, primarily for reasons of efficiency and comradeship.

Furthermore, people in this situation reject a camping trip model based on market exchange and strict private ownership. Cohen specifies four objectionable scenarios:

- (1) A person, by virtue of possessing superior skills, can obtain more resources than others and uses this as a pretext to demand a greater and better share of supplies.
- (2) A person who discovers certain resources by chance claims ownership over them and uses this as a reason to either reduce their own labor burden or demand more materials.
- (3) A person, having acquired certain knowledge that enables them to access a particular resource, charges others a fee for imparting that knowledge.
- (4) A person, having access to resources inherited from a previous generation, thereby enjoys a superior experience compared to others.

In the cooperation and conflicts of the camping trip scenario, Cohen seeks to establish an egalitarian principle to ensure equality of opportunity for all participants. This principle aims to “remove the obstacles to opportunity which some people face and others do not, and sometimes also the obstacles resulting from the enhanced opportunities enjoyed by the more privileged” (Cohen, 2011, p. 24). Promoting this kind of opportunity equality is understood as both an equalizing policy and a redistributive policy. Cohen distinguishes between three forms of equality of opportunity.

The first form is bourgeois equality of opportunity, which aims to eliminate restrictions on opportunities based on status. These restrictions include both formal status restrictions (those arising from the distribution of rights) and informal status restrictions (those stemming from prejudice and other harmful social conceptions).

The second form is the left-liberal equality of opportunity. Building upon the previous form, it opposes the restrictive results caused by the social environment. This form of equality of opportunity seeks to eliminate the influence of social pedigree, ensuring that an individual's fate is determined by their innate talents and subsequent choices.

The third form is socialist equality of opportunity, which involves the correction of innate disadvantages and aims to eliminate involuntary disadvantages for which the individual is not responsible. Once socialist equality of opportunity is achieved, disparities among people no longer stem from natural or social capacities and powers, but rather from differences in tastes and choices.

Cohen argues that only socialist equality of opportunity constitutes the correct equality principle endorsed by justice. However, he considers this principle still insufficient for realizing justice. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a principle of community (or sharing), which restricts the operation of the equality principle by prohibiting certain inequalities that the equality principle itself would otherwise permit.

Cohen proposed the scenario of the camping trip to precisely identify the significant differences that matter in social life. As a microcosm of social life, the camping trip is difficult to scale up to an entire society, but the model it follows is both desirable and feasible. It is desirable because sharing is not an “all-or-nothing” matter; it is feasible (Note 3) because everyone possesses an inclination towards generosity, which needs to be activated, just as the market activates people's selfish inclinations. Activating these generous inclinations and truly realizing distributive justice requires not only institutional design but also a supportive social ethos of justice.

2.3 The Ethos of Justice: The Operational Mechanism of Cohen's Principles

Cohen argues that justice requires a social ethos governing daily choices primarily because focusing solely on the basic structure of society has its limitations. While Rawls invested considerable effort in designing the basic structure to mitigate the negative impacts of egoism, Cohen contends that this basic structure, as a system of coercive rules, still accommodates egoism. Since justice is derived from this basic structure, the following scenarios arise within it: first, individuals can act based on egoistic motives; second, the advantaged, by pursuing personal gain without restraint, further widen the gap

between themselves and the disadvantaged; third, individuals are not, as Rawls claimed, compelled to act strictly according to the principles of justice. More fundamentally, Rawls identifies the primary subject of justice as the basic structure of society—referring mainly to coercive structures like institutions and laws—while deliberately excluding personal choices. However, in certain contexts, the basic structure to which institutions belong depends more on non-coercive structures such as conventions and customs, which are closely linked to personal choices. This reveals an inherent contradiction in Rawls's delineation of the subject of justice. Consequently, Cohen believes that examining justice requires attention not only to coercive social structures but also to non-coercive social structures; social justice necessitates a social ethos that encourages non-coercive, equality-supporting choices.

Secondly, the principle of equality proposed by Cohen inherently permits certain forms of inequality, thus requiring the establishment of a just social ethos to constrain these inequalities. The principle of community (or sharing) advocated by Cohen aims to restrict personal choices thereby limiting the impact of such inequalities. Socialist equality of opportunity is compatible with two types of inequality. The first type stems from preferences in lifestyle choices. For instance, if everyone is entitled to an equal share of fruit, because of different preferences, person A might take more apples while person B takes more oranges. The accessibility of these goods and the enjoyment they provide are generally equal in overall terms, thus this does not constitute inequality in the strict sense. The second type of inequality involves a significant disparity in overall benefits. This inequality arises from people's genuine choices and has two forms: inequality resulting from regrettable choices and inequality due to differential option luck. Inequality from regrettable choices can be understood as poor opportunity management, manifesting as bad luck within a work/reward system. This inequality is justified because people start from equal initial conditions and their actions are undertaken equally. The effects of this inequality can be eliminated through institutional adjustments. Inequality due to differential option luck is the truly problematic one. Deliberate gambling is a classic example: two people bet, the winner takes the loser's money, and the loser's loss goes uncompensated. "Market gambles" are analogous to ordinary gambles, manifested in where one invests their money or labor. Since markets are almost unavoidable, so are market gambles. The aforementioned inequalities are compatible with socialist equality of opportunity, but when they become prevalent, they remain objectionable. Therefore, the realization of justice requires the influence of the principle of community on personal choices.

Finally, just personal choices require guidance from a just social ethos, and just personal choices can, in turn, reinforce that just social ethos. "The ethos of a society is a set of sentiments and attitudes." (Cohen, 2009, p. 157) On one hand, the social ethos can form a moral norm that constrains the behavior of individuals within society. Prevalent sentiments and attitudes can create moral cohesion, transforming individual habits into social habits and individual pressures into social pressures. On the other hand, the social ethos can foster individuals' internal motivations for justice, which cannot be achieved merely through rule-making. For example, widespread selfishness coalesces into a social

ethos of selfishness, leading to corresponding social institutions based on selfishness and so-called social welfare that obscures its selfish nature. Egoistic behavior harmful to others intensifies in such a social environment, thereby damaging social justice. Conversely, a sound social ethos can create a moral binding force, establishing a code of conduct that guides the inclinations and the very nature of individual choices, while morally autonomous individuals consolidate this positive social ethos.

3. Similarities and Differences between Rawls's and Cohen's Principles of Justice

3.1 Similarities Between the Two Principles of Justice

Although the principles of justice proposed by Rawls and Cohen exhibit significant differences, they also share notable commonalities.

First, the principles of justice advanced by both Rawls and Cohen revolve around the theme of distributive justice. Rawls's theory represents a classic framework of distributive justice, treating social primary goods as the objects of distribution. It aims to correct for natural and social contingencies through institutional means, establishes a lexical order to clarify the hierarchy of distributive claims, and achieves a form of equality via the difference principle, ultimately presenting a model of procedural justice. Cohen's focus on distributive justice arises from a critical reflection on traditional Marxism. Traditional Marxism emphasized class society over distributive justice, based on two presumed irreversible historical trends: the growing numerical strength and worsening disadvantage of the working class, enabling their unity as a force; and the continuous development of productive forces, allowing goods to be directly drawn from public reserves. Cohen argues that neither trend materialized: capitalism consistently dissolves working-class solidarity, and due to the non-synchronous development of knowledge and technology coupled with resource scarcity, the historical context of "great abundance" has not arrived. Cohen thus seeks to defend Marxism on moral grounds, shifting focus to the distribution of benefits and burdens in society, with his principles of justice centrally addressing distributive justice.

Second, the hypothetical scenarios constructed by both Rawls and Cohen for deriving their principles of justice detach from actual socio-historical conditions. Rawls's principles are situated within the original position, safeguarded by the veil of ignorance—devices Rawls introduced to ensure impartial deliberation. These hypotheses are based on abstract individuals rather than real, actively engaged persons, attempting to bracket the immediate historical context and interpersonal ties. Cohen's principles are proposed within the hypothetical scenario of the camping trip. While this trip serves as a microcosm of social life, it remains distant from its complex realities. Through this device, Cohen aims to identify the most pressing contemporary disparities and potential socialist responses. Although the camping trip scenario might be realizable on a small scale, Cohen acknowledges uncertainty about how to align individual choices with equality and community on a larger societal level. The scenario presents a partial view of social relations, making it difficult to extrapolate to human society as a whole.

Third, the principles of justice advanced by both Rawls and Cohen share a value orientation concerned with the disadvantaged. Rawls's concern is embodied in his fair equality of opportunity principle and the difference principle. The former requires supplementing the conditions of the least advantaged so that individuals with similar talents have comparable competitive opportunities, thus addressing their right to access opportunities. The inequality permitted by the latter is intended to incentivize the better-off to work hard, ultimately improving social conditions, with the minimum requirement being that it benefits the least advantaged. Cohen's principle of equality itself targets disadvantages in natural endowments. This concept of disadvantage encompasses a broader range than Rawls's principles, reflecting Cohen's deeper concern for disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, Cohen's proposed principle of community is an advocacy that directly encourages the better-off to care for the less advantaged, representing a pathway for expressing concern and providing redress for disadvantaged groups.

3.2 Differences Between the Two Principles of Justice

Cohen developed his own principles of justice in critical response to Rawls's. Although both sets of principles revolve around the theme of distributive justice, they differ fundamentally in several aspects. First, Rawls's principles of justice are more concerned with the design of social order, whereas Cohen's principles focus more on egalitarian relations between individuals. The basic structure of society is the starting point and ultimate concern of Rawls's theory of justice; this basic structure essentially constitutes the order that societal operations ought to follow. Rawls's principles of justice serve both as the basis for designing this order and as the criterion for judging its correctness. The unfolding of the principles of justice is precisely the process through which the order of the constitution, laws, institutions, and practices is progressively established. In Rawls's view, outcomes produced by a just order are themselves just. However, as Cohen points out, Rawls's principles do not impose requirements on individuals' motives for action, which can exacerbate real-world inequalities. Cohen's principles of justice aim precisely to eliminate these inequalities. Consequently, the egalitarian claim advanced by Cohen is broader and more radical than the egalitarian tendency found in Rawls's principles. Based on this claim, Cohen proposes a socialist principle of equality. The socialist equality of opportunity embodied in this principle represents a higher level than the left-liberal equality of opportunity manifested in Rawls's principles.

Second, Rawls's principles of justice function as regulative rules, while Cohen's principles function as fundamental principles. Cohen argues that basic normative principles are fundamentally distinct from regulative principles: fundamental principles answer the philosophical question "What ought the rules that regulate society be?", whereas regulative rules answer the sociological question "What are the rules that regulate society?" Fundamental normative principles are based on intuition and are non-derivative because one cannot decide whether to adopt them based solely on their consequences; regulative principles are rules acquired through state order or formed within social norms, and people decide to adopt them based on the practical effects they can produce. The legitimacy of regulative rules depends on the conviction provided by fundamental normative principles. The constructivist approach

Rawls follows essentially conflates fundamental principles with regulative rules. Fundamental principles of justice are concerned solely with the pure definition of justice, whereas regulative principles of justice arise from the application of fundamental principles to facts within a specific domain.

Third, Rawls's principles of justice attempt to shape a just procedure, while Cohen's principles attempt to foster a just ethos. The sequential ordering of Rawls's principles—the “lexical order”—demonstrates their procedural character. According to this order, a society is just only if its institutions first satisfy the “equal liberty principle”, then the “fair equality of opportunity principle”, and finally the “difference principle”. Furthermore, the process through which the principles take effect—the lifting of the “veil of ignorance”—is itself a procedure that establishes institutions as procedures. Cohen acknowledges the importance of coercive rules but argues that “apart from the usual habits of compliance with its coercive rules, the pressure sustaining the informal structure lacks coercive force” (Cohen, 2009, p. 188). A just ethos, as a non-coercive structure, can form the moral norms of society, shape individuals' motives for action, and thereby promote distributive justice. Without such an ethos, inequalities that are not necessary for improving the situation of the least advantaged will inevitably arise.

3.3 Reasons for the Distinction Between the Two Principles of Justice

The principles of justice proposed by Rawls and Cohen differ significantly, primarily due to the following three reasons.

First, Rawls's principles of justice are grounded in a liberalist stance, whereas Cohen's principles are rooted in a socialist stance. Rawls's theory, in its theoretical model, inherits the liberal tradition: the “veil of ignorance” within the “original position” corresponds to the state of nature, and the principles of justice are the contract arising from this situation. Furthermore, the specific principles within Rawls's framework exemplify liberal “universal values”: the “equal liberty principle” corresponds to “liberty”; the “fair equality of opportunity principle” corresponds to “equality”; and the “difference principle” corresponds to “fraternity”. Finally, Rawls's theory presupposes the permanence of the capitalist system, reflecting a liberal predisposition. As a representative of Analytical Marxism, Cohen's exploration in the field of distributive justice essentially aims to provide a moral defense for socialist equality. Traditional Marxism posited that equality would emerge with the high development of productive forces, which, in Cohen's view, overlooked the importance of moral norms in achieving equality—a issue Cohen sought to address directly. The very naming of Cohen's core concept as “socialist equality of opportunity” signifies his socialist stance. Additionally, Cohen considered institutional designs that could guarantee the realization of this socialist equality, although he himself did not ultimately provide a concrete, comprehensive institutional blueprint.

Second, Rawls and Cohen followed different theoretical approaches in developing their principles: Rawls's approach is constructivist, while Cohen's is intuitionist. The constructivist character of Rawls's theory is manifested in three main aspects: firstly, the original position is set up with specific elements (the circumstances of justice, the formal constraints of the concept of right, the veil of ignorance, and

the conception of the rational agent); secondly, the principles of justice are produced through a constructivist procedure; and thirdly, the design of political institutions is itself a constructive process. The gradual lifting of the veil of ignorance represents the operation of an institutional constructive procedure, encompassing four stages: the selection of the two principles of justice, constitution-making, legislation, and application. Through these stages, theoretical principles are transformed into institutions. In contrast, Cohen's principle of justice follows an intuitionist approach. Intuitionism holds that individuals can access deep normative beliefs through intuition, and the establishment of principles relies on personal normative judgments about concrete practices. Taking luck egalitarianism as an example, the intuition behind distributive justice—that justified inequalities can only stem from certain facts about choices and their consequences—aims, through the method of testing counterexamples, to give intuition a more complete form, thereby reaching the core of intuition. Cohen believed that only by rigorously refining our intuitions about distributive justice can we arrive at the most fundamental normative concept of justice.

Third, Rawls and Cohen focus on different aspects when examining justice: Rawls concentrates on the basic structure of society, while Cohen emphasizes personal choices. At the beginning of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls states: “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions” (Rawls, 1988, p. 3), and the primary subject of justice is precisely the basic structure of society. His proposed principles are intended to apply to this basic structure and are ultimately embodied in institutions. According to this design, outcomes conforming to this structure are considered just. Cohen argues that realizing distributive justice requires not only just rules but also just personal choices made within the framework of these rules. Rawls's focus solely on the basic structure evades a responsibility: the duty to respect distributive justice in the choices of everyday life. Justice in personal choice is a necessary condition for a just society. If people make choices based on incentives rather than justice, even if the basic structure adheres to Rawls's principles, the resulting inequalities may ultimately violate those very principles. Social ethos is closely linked to personal choices, which is why Cohen calls for a social ethos of justice to guide individual conduct beyond institutional rules.

4. Conclusion

Centering on the common theme of distributive justice and aiming to improve the situation of disadvantaged groups, the principles of justice constructed by Rawls and Cohen exhibit numerous differences in their focus, theoretical presentation, and operational mechanisms due to their divergent standpoints, points of entry, and theoretical approaches. Through comparative study, it becomes evident that Cohen's principles of justice not only surpass those of Rawls but also represent a further exploration built upon them:

Firstly, the socialist equality of opportunity proposed by Cohen is based on the left-liberal equality of opportunity represented by Rawls. While retaining the core idea of eliminating opportunity inequalities caused by social contingencies—a key aspect of left-liberal equality of opportunity—Cohen further

delves into the connotation of equality of opportunity. He argues that socialist equality of opportunity should strive to eliminate inequalities arising from both natural endowments and social circumstances. Thus, Cohen's socialist equality of opportunity not only inherits the progressive ideas of left-liberalism but also innovates and expands upon them.

Secondly, Cohen examines the relationship and distinctions between fundamental principles and regulatory principles, conceptualizing his theory of justice from the perspective of fundamental principles. This approach liberates fundamental principles from their dependence on factual circumstances, thereby rescuing justice from the subordinate status to which Rawls had consigned it. Cohen further emphasizes that fundamental principles should possess a purity and independence that transcend empirical facts. A theory of justice constructed on this basis can more profoundly reflect the essential meaning of justice. By starting from fundamental principles, Cohen attempts to unearth a more universal and eternal standard of justice—one that remains unwavering in the face of different social realities.

Thirdly, the realization of justice depends not only on a just basic structure but also requires the support of a just ethos. However, Rawls did not provide a clear explanation of the specific connotation of a just ethos. The concept of a just social ethos, as proposed by Cohen, precisely compensates for the deficiencies in the realization of justice within the basic structure constructed by Rawls. Cohen believes that a just social ethos emphasizes a spirit and attitude where members of society actively practice the principles of justice in their daily lives. It functions not through coercive institutional constraints but through the moral consciousness of societal members and their recognition of the value of justice. In a society with a just ethos, people integrate principles of justice into their behavioral choices; even without external supervision or coercion, they make decisions that align with the demands of justice. Justice is not merely an institutional design but also a spiritual pursuit that must be reflected in the daily actions and values of society's members. Only when a just ethos is widely disseminated and practiced in society can the basic structure of justice constructed by Rawls truly fulfill its intended function, and the goal of justice be tangibly achieved.

Cohen's inheritance and transcendence of Rawls's thought opens up new perspectives for our understanding of justice. However, it is regrettable that Cohen ultimately failed to construct a basic structure of a just society applicable to socialism. Furthermore, because the principles of justice proposed by both Rawls and Cohen are detached from actual social contexts, they inevitably become one-sided abstract conceptions.

By comprehensively considering the strengths and weaknesses of these two principles of justice and examining the theoretical differences and limitations of Rawls and Cohen, we gain valuable insights for exploring the practical path to realizing justice. The principles of justice should not be based solely on abstract hypothetical scenarios and partial social connections but should be closely integrated with specific historical backgrounds and real social relations for consideration. The ultimate realization of justice depends on coordinating the relationships among all parties involved; in this process, particular

attention must be paid to balancing the relationships between normative principles and regulative rules, between just institutions and a just ethos, and between equality and incentives.

References

- Cohen, G. A. (2009). *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Z. Huo, Trans.). Beijing: Peking University Press. (Original work published 2000) <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjz82m8>
- Cohen, G. A. (1989). On the currency of egalitarian justice. *Ethics*, 99(4), 906-944. <https://doi.org/10.1086/293126>
- Cohen, G. A. (2014). *Rescuing justice and equality* (W. Chen, Trans.). Shanghai: Fudan University Press. (Original work published 2008) <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674262713>
- Cohen, G. A. (2011). *Why Not Socialism?* (Z. Duan, Trans.). Beijing: People's Publishing House. (Original work published 2009)
- Rawls, J. (1988). *A Theory of Justice* (H. Huaihong, H. Baogang, & S. Liao, Trans.). Beijing: China Social Sciences Press. (Original work published 1971) <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674042605>
- Rawls, J. (2009). *A Theory of Justice* (Revised edition) (H. Huaihong, H. Baogang, & S. Liao, Trans.). Beijing: China Social Sciences Press. (Original work published 1971) <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674042605>

Notes

Note 1. The savings rate refers to the proportion of wealth each generation should accumulate for its descendants.

Note 2. Pareto improvement refers to a reallocation of resources or optimization of institutions where at least one individual's situation is improved without harming anyone else. When no further such improvements are possible, the state of Pareto optimality (or Pareto efficiency) is achieved.

Note 3. Cohen's use of the term “feasible” here refers to the model's capacity to sustainably exist once established, rather than implying its immediate realization.