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DEFENDING EQUALITY THROUGH COHEN'S VALUE OF COMMUNITY

– Yunus Emre Berber –

Abstract: Community, which occupies a central place in Gerald Allan Cohen's political philosophy, is characterized by the mutual care that individuals extend to each other. This study illustrates this often-overlooked value across different contexts and proposes a new conceptual model of how the (in)equality of economic distribution influences its viability. I argue that the realization of the value of community can be undermined by two interrelated elements: an objective element, the hierarchical stratification of life experiences, and a subjective element, the perception among the disadvantaged that the better-off choose not to assist them. Building on this, I contend that, compared to alternative distributive principles such as utilitarianism, sufficientarianism, limitarianism, maximinism, and prioritarianism, egalitarianism most robustly sustains the community value. Accordingly, community itself furnishes a powerful rationale for endorsing egalitarianism over competing distributive principles, a conclusion further corroborated by the core insights of relational egalitarianism.

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Introduction

There may be various reasons for endorsing the demand for equality. First, one might uphold equality on the grounds of its intrinsic moral worth. It may also be defended as a constitutive value of justice. Third, equality can be pursued instrumentally, as a means to other values. In this paper, I argue that Gerald Allan Cohen's concept of community provides a strong reason to support equality in instrumental terms.

While Cohen's contributions to the debates on equality and justice have been widely recognized, his account of community, which is central to his vision of socialism, has received relatively little attention (Nielsen & Albertsen, 2022, p. 304). A similar asymmetry appears in contemporary philosophy, where *fraternité*, the counterpart to community among the ideals of the French Revolution, is often overlooked in favor of its more frequently discussed companions, *liberté* and *égalité* (Spicker, 2006, p. 119). By

Dr. Yunus Emre Berber
Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Faculty of Law
Department of Philosophy and Sociology of Law
E-mail: yeberber@aybu.edu.tr
ORCID: 0000-0001-5432-0876

helping to fill this gap, the paper aims both to expand the discussion of the importance of community and to show the specific ways in which it might be revitalized in contemporary societies. It also seeks to underscore the necessity and possibility of defending equality against destructive objections such as the levelling down.

The relative neglect of community (and fraternity) in the literature can be partly explained by the concept's contested and difficult-to-define nature.[1] For this reason, in the first section, I frame Cohen's conception of community by drawing on a range of its practical manifestations. In the second section, I examine the normative roles assigned to the value of community in Cohen's philosophical framework. While it is widely accepted that there is a strong connection between community and equality, the nature of this relationship remains a matter of debate. Notably, Cohen does not provide a systematic explanation of why inequality poses a threat to community. In the third section, I propose a (new) model of interpretation that makes explicit and organizes two elements that Cohen only hints at: (1) hierarchical differentiation in life experiences and (2) the formation of a belief among those in worse circumstances that they are left without assistance in the face of life's difficulties. This model demonstrates that the tension between inequality and community is continuous; while radical disparities may critically undermine communal bonds, even modest inequalities exert a proportional strain on its spirit. Finally, in the fourth section, I argue that among utilitarian, sufficientarian, limitarian, difference-principle-based, prioritarian, and egalitarian distributive principles, the last of these most robustly supports community. In doing so, I also illustrate how the contemporary shift towards relational egalitarianism reinforces this profound connection between equality and the ideal of community.

1. Community Value and Its Appearances

According to Cohen's (2009) well-known formulation, the value of community can be characterized as "that people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another" (p. 34). In other words, community entails that people living together should take an interest in one another's fate and, as a consequence, be willing to help each other.[2] Elements commonly associated with

[1] Although this paper follows Cohen in considering these concepts together, it should be noted that relational ideals such as community, fraternity, solidarity, fellowship, and love remain vague and under-theorized, leading to their frequent conflation in contemporary political theory (Laitinen, 2022; Frazer, 1999, p. 5; Scholz, 2008, pp. 2–3; Schwarzenbach, 2015, p. 4–6; Bayertz, 1999, p. 4). Spicker (2006), for example, distinguishes these terms by relating fraternity to mutual aid and cooperation, solidarity to moral obligation, and community to the broader and vaguer idea of a group's identity and boundaries (pp. 120, 130, 151). Still, Cohen himself does not attach much importance to these finer distinctions. In many places, he treats community and fraternity as equivalent and uses them interchangeably (Vrousalis, 2012, p. 142). This vagueness, no doubt, weakens the force of the concept. One of the aims of the analytical account developed in this paper is to reduce this vagueness.

[2] As Spafford (2019) points out, there are two prominent approaches in the literature concerning the definition of the value of community. The first is based on the idea of a common ground. According to this view, the presence and strength of community in a society depends on the extent of shared experiences. The second approach, which this paper also adopts, understands community in terms of "mutual caring." On this account, community is determined by how much people within a society care for one another. Spafford criticizes both views and instead proposes that the value of commu-

liberalism, such as respecting the autonomy of others, maintaining neutrality in social interactions, and affirming equal rights for all, are, for Cohen, morally insufficient. He argues that among our moral duties is not only "caring for fellow humans," but also making such caring one of the central aspects of our lives (Nielsen & Albertsen, 2022, p. 317).

This value is, in fact, very familiar in everyday life. Our relationships with family members and close friends are often governed by the principle of community. We offer support not because we are compelled by the strict demands of justice or by a fleeting sense of compassion, but because we regard the bonds we share with them as worthy of care. We attend to their emotions, take their concerns seriously, share our resources, and offer assistance in times of hardship.

The idea of community naturally involves a commitment to equality and a distinctive sense of reciprocity. In small-scale social contexts, such as family relationships or a camping trip with close friends, "most people, even most anti-egalitarians, accept, indeed, take for granted, norms of equality and reciprocity" (Cohen, 2009, pp. 4–5). To clarify how this kind of reciprocity differs from standard market norms, Cohen presents a hypothetical example: someone in need of home repairs cannot reasonably expect their cousin, a full-time repair technician who works six days a week, to offer their labor free of charge. Yet, "under standard family norms," if the cousin voluntarily offers help on a Sunday, it would be inappropriate for them to request payment. Cohen (2008) concedes that such arrangements might not align with economic efficiency, but he maintains that whatever economic efficiency may recommend, "that's not how you treat relatives, and it's not how you treat fellow citizens, in a communist society" (p. 225).

Cohen's camping trip story in *Why Not Socialism?* also offers a vivid framework for appreciating the deep connection between community and equality. Through a series of hypothetical examples, he illustrates how inequality, even when justified by desert and accepted as fair, can produce morally repugnant outcomes. For instance, when Harry, being better at fishing than the others, claims that he is entitled to a greater portion of the fish; Sylvia, having discovered an apple tree, insists that her workload be reduced in return for sharing the apples; and Morgan, arguing that the pond was established by his father decades earlier, claims that he can eat its fish without sharing, the response is the same in each case: "don't be such a shmuck!" (Cohen, 2009, p. 7).

We experience the demands of community strongly in contexts such as family relationships, trips with friends, or among classmates with whom we share desks and time. I am pleased to report that in Turkish law schools, students are still sharply criticized for trying to sell their meticulously prepared lecture notes to classmates. This criticism does not derive from considerations of justice or compassion, but from the value of community: the special bond formed among peers who spend a long time together, facing the same challenges and sharing many aspects of life, renders such behavior, at least for many, unacceptable.

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nity should be understood as a disposition to aid. In this framework, community is measured by the willingness to help others in society and to alleviate the harm they face. This paper adopts the mutual caring view. Disposition to aid is understood as the logical outcome and clearest indicator of mutual caring. It is true that the absence of such a disposition reflects a weakness in community, but only because it reveals the absence of mutual caring itself.

What unites all of these examples is their non-mass character. Today, the value of community appears to find expression primarily within small and close-knit groups. Yet if we look back in history, especially to times before the rise of modern individualism, it is evident that community played a far more central role in structuring social life, manifesting in distinctive (and in some respects, arguably flawed) forms. In contrast, today this value seems to have been gradually exiled from broader social spheres and driven into narrower domains such as the family or circles of close friends.

Nevertheless, even in contemporary capitalist societies, one can still identify broader social spheres in which the spirit of community plays a visible and enduring role. One clear example is religious occasions. Community is undoubtedly among the most prominent, if not the foundational, elements of what is commonly referred to as the Christmas spirit. As Dickens (1843/1979) has Fred say in *A Christmas Carol* in the 1850s, Christmas is "a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time." It is a time "when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys" (p. 12). This passage offers a powerful articulation of the value of community: the reason for helping, sharing, forgiving, and showing solidarity lies in viewing others not as another species of beings, but as fellow travelers on the same road as ourselves.

The same spirit can be observed during the month of Ramadan. Across the Muslim world, the shared daily experience of fasting from dawn to sunset during this month among people from vastly different socio-economic backgrounds gives rise to a vivid expression of the value of community. It is not uncommon, for instance, to witness scenes in which strangers on public transportation break their fast together by sharing whatever food they have with one another, as they are unable to reach home in time for iftar. Such moments are everyday occurrences during the month of Ramadan in Muslim-majority societies.

Major natural disasters and catastrophes can also bring about a sudden and powerful resurgence of community. In such moments, we often witness people rushing to help complete strangers with remarkable eagerness. Large numbers of individuals share whatever resources they have and devote their time and labor to supporting others. Following the devastating earthquake that struck the Turkish province of Kahramanmaras in February 2023, the driving force behind the nationwide mobilization of aid efforts was precisely the value of community. Tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of people abandoned their daily routines to assist those affected by the disaster. Across the country, people formed spontaneous volunteer groups in sports halls, where they passed donated goods hand to hand, packaged them, and loaded them onto trucks bound for the earthquake zone. This was not done out of a sense of justice rooted in equality, nor can compassion adequately explain it. Rather, people acted because they did not see those in need as "another race of creatures," but as their own "fellow human beings," and because they cared about them.[3]

[3] Of course, natural disasters do not invariably generate solidarity; they may also give rise to selfishness, looting, and opportunism. Still, one might argue that such conduct appears especially troubling in moments of crisis, compared with ordinary market life, where self-interested behavior is often regarded as normal. In disasters, by contrast, there seems to be a stronger expectation that community should take priority. From this perspective, opportunistic behavior may be seen as objectionable not only because it is harmful, but also because it runs against an implicit expectation of communal reciprocity rather than market logic.

In short, community is about seeing those we live alongside not as strangers, but as people whose fate we care about and toward whom we feel a disposition to help. It requires us to view others, at least to some degree, in the way we view our family members or close friends. Perhaps the lyrics of an old left-wing song, which Cohen (2009,) himself cites, offer an apt expression of the transformation this deeply rooted value envisions: "If we should consider each other, a neighbor, a friend, or a brother, it could be a wonderful world, it could be a wonderful world" (p. 51). It is a form of shared life that possesses intrinsic value—one that is no longer recognized as central as it once was, increasingly sidelined in political philosophy, at times left to religious or moral preaching, and particularly at risk of slipping from view in developed societies.

2. Two Roles of Community

In Cohen's philosophy, the role of community can be articulated under two categories.[4] First, community is tied to a conception of social relations that stands in contrast to that of market societies. As he notes (1992), "(t)he immediate motive to productive activity in a market society is usually some mixture of greed and fear" (p. 10). In such a framework, other people are regarded either as instruments for personal enrichment or as potential threats. While this structure may increase economic efficiency, it commodifies human beings and corrodes their moral worth (Cohen, 2000, p. 181). As Cohen (1995) puts it, "these are horrible ways of seeing other people" (p. 262). The value of community, by contrast, requires that we see others as kin, friends, or neighbors. It thus stands out by offering an alternative vision of social relations to those shaped by the market and defined by the liberal worldview. It calls for replacing the Hobbesian image of *homo homini lupus* with a particular form of fraternity and solidarity, one found among tribal societies, within families, and between close friends. In this regard, the idea of community presents a serious challenge to the liberal conception of the person (Nielsen & Albertsen, 2022, p. 316).

The substance of the community value imposes a notion of reciprocity that stands in stark contrast to the one implied by market society.[5] According to Cohen (2009), community makes the fundamental motivation for participating in productive activity the following: "I produce in a spirit of commitment to my fellow human beings: I desire to serve them while being served by them, and I get satisfaction from each side of that equation" (p. 41). Cohen develops a similar account of community and reciprocity

[4] In *Why Not Socialism?* Cohen (2009) explains the value of community through two elements: one is equality, and the other is communal reciprocity (p. 35). Gilabert (2012) also chooses to elaborate on these two elements in defining community, in a way similar to Cohen's approach (p. 104). Nielsen and Albertsen (2022) add a third component, which Cohen associates with the concept of "justificatory community" in his debate with Rawls (pp. 305–306; see also Albertsen, 2019, pp. 378–379). Vrousalis (2015) on the other hand, maintains Cohen's original dual model, but treats the "justificatory community," which Nielsen and Albertsen present as a separate aspect of community, as part of the equality-related component (pp. 110–111). See also Roemer (2017, pp. 304–309). Still, it is important to note that these categories do not exhaust the full potential of community. Cohen generally expressed his ideas within the framework of polemics with other philosophers. The roles attributed to community here reflect the roles Cohen invoked in those particular debates. Community may, in fact, play a broader role in the organization of social life.

[5] Cohen (2009) notes that this special reciprocity constitutes an "anti-market" principle (p. 39).

elsewhere in his work (1995, p. 262; 1994, p. 9). Community, therefore, requires what Cohen calls "communal reciprocity," where people engage in productive activity not to pursue self-interest or satisfy personal goals, but in order to meet others' needs. This puts community in direct opposition to the logic of the market. As Choo (2014) rightly notes, according to Cohen, "there is an essential conflict between community and markets in any form" (p. 160).

The second major role played by the value of community concerns its relationship with equality. The connection between community and justice has sparked significant debate in the literature. Vrousalis (2015), for instance, posits a profound tension between justice, including Cohen's own theory of justice, and the ideal of community (p. 99). He illustrates this claim through the lottery example (p. 109), which Cohen himself addresses. Although the inequalities resulting from a purely voluntary lottery entered by initially equal individuals may not pose a problem from the standpoint of justice, they must be problematized from the perspective of community. Albertsen (2019), on the other hand, contends that the conflict between these two values is merely superficial. He argues (pp. 382–383) that they do not logically exclude one another and that, when an egalitarian ethos prevails, practical clashes between them can be prevented.

Against the backdrop of this theoretical debate, the relationship between community and justice manifests itself in three distinct ways. Sometimes, it is depicted as a supporting element in the realization of justice; at other times, it appears as one of justice's constitutive components; and occasionally, it becomes a means for criticizing or constraining egalitarian justice (Nielsen & Albertsen, 2022, p. 305).[6] Nonetheless, in every instance, the value of community must be regarded as conceptually independent from justice (Vrousalis, 2010, p. 206).[7] Of course, this independence does not imply disconnection: in Cohen's thought, community and egalitarian justice are in constant interaction. Just as community contributes to the pursuit of justice, egalitarian justice also enables the flourishing of community. "Each value supported the other, and each was strengthened by the fact that it was supported by the other" (Cohen, 1994, p. 6).

According to Cohen, community serves to frame egalitarian justice. Even under ideal conditions, egalitarian justice—as Cohen also describes as socialist equality of opportunity—may lead to outcomes that do not seem entirely right when everything is considered together. Two typical examples of this, according to Cohen (2009), are inequalities resulting from regrettable choices and from option luck (p. 26).[8] For exam-

[6] For a recent discussion that argues it is not egalitarian justice but only the value of community that constitutes the ethical core of socialism, see Noonan (2012).

[7] For a different view suggesting that certain demands of community should be, to some extent, considered part of justice, see Gilabert (2012, p. 107).

[8] It should be noted that while Cohen's position in *Why Not Socialism?* aligns closely with his earlier 1989 luck egalitarian stance, he offers a more nuanced view in his 2004 article, "Expensive Taste Rides Again." In that work, Cohen revises his earlier position and argues that certain forms of option luck or expensive tastes might actually require compensation for reasons of distributive justice, particularly when they matter a great deal to the agent. Specifically, Cohen contends that if individuals deeply identify with a preference and cannot reasonably be expected to rid themselves of it without violating their own judgment, the fact that satisfying this preference is expensive constitutes a form of bad luck that warrants egalitarian compensation. See Cohen (1989, pp. 922–923; 2004, pp. 6–8; 2009, pp. 30–32).

ple, justice does not require compensation for someone who refused all the job offers available to them and has consequently become unemployed and in need of financial support; yet community might still demand support for that individual. Likewise, justice may not demand compensation for individuals who knowingly took risks and suffered the consequences (such as a helmetless motorcyclist involved in an accident, or a heavy smoker diagnosed with lung cancer), but in at least some such cases community clearly calls for supporting those individuals.[9] In this way, community helps to frame egalitarian justice as Cohen understands it.

Second, as Nielsen and Albertsen (2022) rightly note, "community serves to constitute justice by providing for society the needed motivational spirit in the sense of the ethos" (p. 313). For the egalitarian ethos that constitutes this motivational spirit, especially prominent in Cohen's debate with Rawls, a robust sense of community is essential. Third, community is regarded not merely as an external moral constraint, but as a constitutive requirement of justice itself. Gilabert (2012), for instance, argues that the core demands of community, such as securing basic needs and protecting equal status, should be integrated into a pluralistic framework as stringent demands of justice (p. 107). Building on this view, King (2018) similarly suggests that the enforced component of the community constraint is most plausibly reconstructed as a fundamental requirement of justice (p. 230).

However, these points do not exhaust the relationship between community and egalitarian justice. Indeed, this relationship is not unidirectional but interdependent. Just as community shapes justice, the realization of egalitarian justice determines the viability of the community itself. According to Cohen, community comes under increasing strain as social inequalities widen, especially when they generate greatly differing life prospects (O'Brien, 2012, pp. 18–19). As he expresses it, community "is put under strain when large inequalities obtain" (Cohen, 2009, p. 34). The point is not that community disappears whenever any inequality exists, but that inequality places community under increasing pressure as hierarchical differences in life experience widen and become socially salient. As Cohen (2009) puts it:

> We cannot enjoy full community, you and I, if you make, and keep, say, ten times as much money as I do, because my life will then labor under challenges that you will never face, challenges that you could help me to cope with, but do not, because you keep your money. (p. 35)

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[9] This situation highlights a central debate in the luck egalitarian literature known as the "harshness objection" (or "abandonment objection"). Critics argue that strictly denying compensation to victims of bad option luck, such as Fleurbaey's famous example of Bert who rides a motorcycle without a helmet, or Anderson's uninsured negligent driver, makes luck egalitarianism unacceptably harsh and disrespectful (Anderson, 1999, pp. 295–296; Fleurbaey, 1995, pp. 40–41; Voigt, 2007, pp. 389–390). In response to this powerful critique, several scholars have attempted to show that luck egalitarianism can avoid this harshness and justify public assistance for such individuals without abandoning its core premises (Knight, 2015; for an analytical breakdown of the various interpretations of this objection, see Albertsen & Nielsen, 2020).

3. Car Driver and Bus-Rider

To illustrate how inequality places community under strain, Cohen uses a hypothetical tension between two individuals: one who must take the bus to work every day, and another who commutes comfortably by private car. He invites us to imagine that, for one day, the car-driver has to lend their car to their spouse and is forced to take the bus (Cohen 2009, pp. 36–37). After this brief experience, it would be absurd for the car-driver to complain to the bus-rider about how difficult bus travel is. The complaint is objectionable not because the bus-rider lacks empathy, but because no one can reasonably expect it in that situation (King, 2018, p. 220). In this scenario, taking a private car to work is something both individuals would prefer, and it occupies a higher place in the hierarchy of available options.

This is just one illustration among many. Inequalities in social life persist in countless forms. For instance, while some people struggle to access even the most basic emergency health services, others enjoy effortless access to the most sophisticated care. For some, luxury food items are a regular part of their table, whereas for others, affording meat or meat products requires serious financial sacrifice and the abandonment of other needs. For some, international travel for leisure is routine; others find it difficult even to move around their own city. Economic inequality compels people on different ends of the spectrum to eat different foods, attend different schools, work in different jobs, and shop in different stores. Thus, even when people are physically present in the same environment, they often inhabit entirely different worlds (Otteson, 2014, p. 73).

Divergent life experiences along a hierarchical axis, especially when those differences reach a radical level, can hinder people's ability to form empathetic bonds and genuinely care for one another.[10] As Cohen (2009) puts it, sometimes the resources you refuse to share "cut(s) you off from our common life" (p. 38). If you are largely exempt from the hardships faced by others and nonetheless choose not to share your resources with them, how can you claim to be part of a community grounded in mutual concern? Worse still, when such inequalities become systemic, society is stratified around consumption, and "between strata there is liable to be incomprehension and hostility" (D. Miller, 1982, p. 84). On the other hand, "even kvetching over shared inconveniences has genuine value" (R. Miller, 2010, p. 250) and facing the same difficulties can bring people together into a community.

What matters here is the limitation of life chances experienced by those who occupy the disadvantaged side of inequality. Economically disadvantaged groups do not wish to send their children to poorly performing schools, they have not chosen to travel less, buying cheaper and lower-quality products is not among their hobbies, and they suffer from receiving inferior healthcare. Therefore, the difficulty posed by inequality from the standpoint of community is not the same as the one that, as Brennan (2015) somewhat oddly claims, arises from people having different "tastes, religions, views of the good, ideas of the sublime, [and] personalities" (p. 122). The differences Brennan

[10] As Albertsen (2019) puts it, such inequalities lead people to "end up living disconnected lives, rather than living in a community" (p. 379). See also Van Schoelandt (2014, p. 146).

refers to, which I shall call "horizontal differences," do not stem from disparities in power or capability. They are the result of people's free choices and preferences. Rather than making dialogue impossible, such differences often create new grounds for shared experience and exchange.

However, the function of the "hierarchical" differences in life experiences created by economic inequality is precisely the opposite. These differences concern individuals' "powers to control the course of their lives" (O'Brien, 2012, p. 18). In Cohen's words, "...it will show itself in many other ways, for we enjoy widely different powers to care for ourselves, to protect and care for offspring, to avoid danger, and so on" (2009, p. 36). These kinds of differences reveal not tastes but opportunities. They imply not free choices but compelled deprivations. It is precisely these hierarchical differences that do real damage to the community.

For this very reason, it is pertinent that Spafford (2019) explains the reason why the car-driver cannot complain to the bus-rider about the one-day bus journey by associating it with the latent tension brought about by this deprivation (pp. 229–230). To see the role played by the hierarchical character of differences in life experience in creating this tension, it suffices to imagine that the bus-rider in fact owns a private vehicle but chooses to use public transport for environmental reasons. This small hypothetical change shifts the difference between the two lives onto a horizontal axis and suddenly renders the two hypothetical individuals capable of re-engaging in dialogue. The car-driver can now reasonably complain about the difficulty of taking the bus based on a single day's experience. This is because their difference in life experience is no longer related to deprivation, or to one person having access to something that both would prefer. Rather, it is now about differences in taste, preference, and lifestyle, none of which, unlike hierarchical differences, inherently undermines the community.

On the other hand, the relationship between community and economic inequality is better understood as continuous rather than threshold-based or governed by an all-or-nothing logic. As hierarchical differentiation intensifies and the gap produced by economic inequality widens, the ideal of community is more deeply undermined; as inequality narrows, the strain on community correspondingly diminishes. Even so, from a strictly logical point of view, community will continue to remain under some degree of strain for as long as vertical (hierarchical) differences among individuals persist. As David Miller (1982) observes, even relatively modest economic inequalities tend to segregate social relationships into exclusive income brackets (p. 84). Since social life and consumption patterns are heavily dictated by income, people from different economic strata find it hard to sympathize with one another. This continuous strain caused by even the smallest inequalities does not, of course, imply that every form of vertical differentiation must be eliminated in practice. On the contrary, if value pluralism is taken seriously, the ideal of community must sometimes be balanced against other irreducible human values, such as freedom and efficiency, and may have to give way to them to some extent.[11]

[11] For Cohen's account of value pluralism, which he refers to as "radical pluralism," see Cohen (2008, pp. 4–5).

In addition to all this, the aforementioned hierarchical differentiation in life experiences is not, by itself, sufficient to severely undermine the community. Cohen (2009) further links the harm that economic inequality causes to community to the awareness among those facing serious hardship that others in far better circumstances could help them but choose not to (pp. 35–36). It is precisely this awareness that undermines community under current distributive arrangements.

The logic of this dynamic can be easily illustrated with an example: if Jeff Bezos were to give just one million dollars from his multi-hundred-billion-dollar fortune to an ordinary person, that individual could resolve most of the significant difficulties they face. Nearly all their challenges related to housing, food, education, healthcare, and access to justice would vanish.

Despite this reality, Bezos's continued choice to preserve his wealth reveals a lack of concern for producing urgent solutions to the problems faced by those he shares a society with[12]. How, then, can these individuals be expected to feel that any sense of community exists between themselves and Bezos? How could they possibly care about him, want to help him when necessary, or find such efforts meaningful, when they have directly experienced that he does not care enough to help lift them out of their most urgent struggles?

The same phenomenon, when considered in more immediate and smaller-scale settings, leads to the same conclusion. Suppose an older brother, despite having the means, refuses to help his sibling who has lost their home and is living on the streets. Can that brother still claim that they are part of a caring family? Or consider a group of five friends on a hiking trip. If one of them falls ill and the others leave that person behind without offering help, can we still speak of them as a community? In both cases, the disadvantaged individual knows that the others could have helped but chose not to. It is precisely this awareness that tears apart the community. Community, by its very nature, is tied to solidarity and sharing. Once the belief takes root that the other party, despite having the means, chooses not to act, withholds their resources, and refuses solidarity, then speaking meaningfully of the presence of community becomes profoundly difficult.

This subjective element, the belief that others could help but choose not to, can arise even in relatively minor inequalities that do not involve matters of life and death. In Cohen's camping trip example, for instance, no one faces starvation, and the resulting inequalities are by no means radical. Yet Harry's refusal to share the fish he has caught, or Sylvia's insistence on a lighter workload in exchange for access to the apple tree she has discovered, still poisons the spirit of community. The problem here, at least in part, has to do with the fact that some are in a more advantageous position than others and are unwilling to share that advantage. As Jason Brennan notes, Cohen's view is demanding enough to regard even relatively modest and blameless advantages, such as having a little more money or owning a fish pond as the result of a bet, as potentially damaging to community. In this respect, even inequalities that are deserved and not especially large may still harm community to some extent (Brennan, 2015, pp. 118–119).

[12] This example does not deny Bezos's philanthropic pledges or donations. It is intended only to illustrate the normative question of whether the continued possession of extreme wealth amid urgent unmet needs is compatible with the kind of communal concern defended here.

To be sure, community need not collapse immediately in such cases, and the damage caused by smaller inequalities may be more tolerable from its point of view. Even so, when unequal life experiences are coupled with a refusal to help or share, they remain, to a greater or lesser degree, harmful to community, even if that harm may, for other reasons, be regarded as justified or tolerable.

In conclusion, the mechanism by which economic inequality hinders community can be analytically summarized through a two-component model:

(1) The hierarchical differences in everyday life experiences generated by economic inequality place pressure on the value of community. This material divergence constitutes the objective element of the pressure that economic inequality places on community.

(2) When this is combined with a subjective element, namely, the belief among those in disadvantaged positions that others could help them if they wished but choose not to, it results in a significant impediment to the realization of community.

The objective element alone, namely the mere existence of unequal living conditions, may not in itself constitute a barrier to community. If those in disadvantaged positions believe that, even with the best intentions, the better-off are simply unable to help them, community may remain intact. For instance, Albertsen's (2019) thought experiment supports this view: he describes a city divided by a deep canyon that prevents any movement of goods or people, where one side has significantly more fertile land, creating a widely acknowledged inequality (p. 380). Yet despite this inequality, the value of community might still be realized. In such cases, hierarchical differences in living conditions affect community only in a limited way. Conversely, the subjective element, namely the belief that the better-off could help the worse-off if they wished but choose not to, cannot meaningfully take hold in the absence of a background of inequality. It is only when both elements are present together that a substantial strain on community, grounded in economic distribution, truly emerges.

It should be noted, however, that this pressure may not be absolute in its effect. In certain circumstances, particularly where a "justificatory community"[13] exists, as Cohen puts it, in which inequalities are accounted for and justice is believed to prevail, it may be possible for community to persist despite the distributive tension.[14] Yet the fact that the tension can be overcome in practice does not mean that it does not exist. After all, if a given distribution leads to significant hierarchical differences among individuals, it constitutes a structural strain on community, whether or not it is ultimately surmountable. My claim, then, is not that community is possible only under strict equality, but that community has a pro tanto egalitarian tendency: other things equal, it is more fully realized as socially divisive inequalities recede.

[13] According to Cohen, those who possess greater resources must be able to justify their position to those who are worse off and must also be willing to attempt such justification. Being a community requires accountability. Individuals who fail to meet these conditions should be regarded as not belonging to the "justificatory community" Cohen (2008, pp. 44–45).

[14] For Cohen's note on the possibility that social hierarchy might coexist with community, see Cohen (2011, p. 218).

4. How Economic Distribution Hinders Community

This entire discussion brings us back to egalitarianism. Over the past few decades, many alternative principles of distribution have been proposed. Yet none of them supports community as effectively as egalitarianism. Our old friend utilitarianism, or libertarian approaches like Nozick's entitlement theory, are notable for legitimizing radically different life conditions among individuals. The former is focused on maximizing overall utility while the latter prioritizes the protection of certain hypothetical rights. But both perform poorly when it comes to the community. Utilitarianism discourages questioning the relative size of slices as long as the pie is growing. Entitlement theory, for its part, provides a solid foundation for fragmenting society into isolated individuals who bear resentment toward one another.

But what about egalitarianism's closer relatives? One of the first principles that comes to mind is sufficientarianism, which demands that everyone be maintained above a certain threshold. As Frankfurt (1987) argues, "what is important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have the same but that each should have enough" (p. 21). Admittedly, some sufficientarians set this threshold quite high, such as Axelsen and Nielsen's (2015) ideal of "freedom from duress" (p. 412).

While even this high-threshold sufficientarianism may alleviate the economic strain on community, it does not fully remove it. As King points out, realizing Cohen's community ideal structurally goes beyond sufficiency. While sufficientarianism successfully guarantees a minimum threshold, it remains indifferent to the distance between the top and the bottom. Community, however, requires "minding the gap" so that the worst-off do not face significantly more challenges than the best-off (King, 2018, p. 226). Even where everyone enjoys a sufficient minimum, significant asymmetries in lived experience may still persist. Some will continue to face burdens that others never encounter, including burdens that the better-off could ease but choose not to. For sufficientarianism to fully satisfy community, the threshold must be so high that no one faces hardship, rendering surplus resources meaningless. However, as long as acquiring wealth above the threshold still makes life easier and significantly differentiates lived experiences, sufficientarian indifference to top-bottom inequalities will fail the demands of community.

A more recent proposal, limitarianism, performs even worse in resolving the economic strain on community, unless it is combined with another form of egalitarianism. At first glance, a society in which no one is allowed to exceed a certain upper threshold of wealth may seem attractive.[15] At least, hierarchical differences cannot grow to extreme levels. However, the marginal utility of distributable goods increases as their supply diminishes. If limitarianism were accepted not as a partial constraint, but as a full theory of justice, which Robeyns, its originator, explicitly denies,[16] it would legitimize the comfortable lifestyles of some while others continue to struggle in poverty. Indeed, when viewed from the perspective of a mother struggling to feed her children, it hardly seems possible to develop a bond based on caring with someone who enjoys the comforts of an ordinary middle-class life.

[15] For comprehensive discussions on limitarianism, see Robeyns (2017, 2019, 2022, 2024).

[16] Robeyns (2017, p. 1; 2022, p. 258) stresses that limitarianism is not intended to replace another distributive principle, but rather to serve as a complement to existing ones.

Distribution principles that are closer to equality provide greater support for community, but challenges remain. For instance, Rawls (1971) bases his theory of economic justice on the maximin rule, which holds that "we are to adopt the alternative the worst outcome of which is superior to the worst outcomes of the others" (pp. 152–153). The resulting difference principle legitimizes inequality when the least advantaged members of society also benefit from the new distribution. This framework may help Rawls avoid critiques regarding efficiency, yet the same cannot be said for community. Rawls's theory allows for immense disparities. It seems futile to expect a person who makes a meagre living by working eleven hours a day to establish a relationship of mutual caring with the unknown owners of large corporations who never have to work to overcome any difficulties.

Prioritarianism, which extends Rawls's maximin principle not only to the worst-off but gradually and continuously to the entire society, is the distributive principle closest to egalitarianism. Introduced by Parfit, it aims to preserve the spirit of equality without falling prey to the levelling down objection. However, as Parfit himself acknowledges, this objection, which criticizes egalitarianism for legitimizing pulling the better-off down in order to achieve equality, is only relevant to those approaches that assert equality as an intrinsic value. In contrast, the community-based defense of equality offers an instrumental justification, which can partially legitimize levelling down.

For instance, many would find it deeply troubling if, in a mortal world, only the ultra-rich had access to a drug granting immortality, or if only the wealthiest could genetically enhance their children to be smarter, faster, and stronger than everyone else. Opposing such scenarios clearly involves endorsing a kind of levelling down. In both cases, the value of community plays at least some role in rendering such opposition legitimate.

Striving to increase efficiency, combat poverty, or set limits on excessive wealth may all be worthwhile goals. But none of these supports community as strongly as egalitarianism does. Maintaining a Pareto-optimal distribution may be important in its own right. Therefore, the fact that maximinist and prioritarian principles can achieve this by compromising on efficiency might be valuable in some respects. However, these compromises pose an obstacle to their being as conducive to community as egalitarianism.

One might object that if theories such as utilitarianism, sufficientarianism, limitarianism, or prioritarianism permit inequalities that undermine community, they can simply be supplemented by a community principle, just as Cohen supplements luck egalitarianism. Accordingly, community has no special affinity with an egalitarian principle of distribution. However, this objection misses two points. First, the degree of tension between a distributive principle and the community constraint differs significantly. In theories such as sufficientarianism or utilitarianism, adding a community principle would not complement their core distributive logic, on the contrary, it would operate so as to override their basic distributive tendencies.

Second, and more importantly, even in Cohen's own account, the appeal to community in limiting luck egalitarianism serves to correct the inequalities generated by its responsibility-sensitive dimension. In that sense, community is mobilized there, too, in the service of equality. If the severe inequalities produced by another distributive prin-

ciple could be constrained by a community principle, that would indeed be desirable, and this very possibility constitutes the central claim of this paper: interventions made on the basis of community are egalitarian, since the value of community itself calls for an egalitarian distribution. In other words, the value of community provides a strong instrumental defense of equality.

Ultimately, Cohen's notion of community provides a compelling justification for preferring egalitarianism over alternative distributive principles, because the realization of community gives us strong reason to favor greater equality and to resist inequalities that become structurally divisive. Indeed, the contemporary literature's increasing shift in focus toward relational egalitarianism corroborates this profound connection, demonstrating that the pursuit of equality is fundamentally intertwined with the value of community and the proper organization of a shared social life.

In this regard, the fundamental premise of relational egalitarianism shares both a profound conceptual overlap and a common egalitarian spirit with Cohen's ideal of community.[17] This is because relational egalitarians conceptualize equality not strictly as a distributive metric regarding how resources, opportunities, or welfare are allocated, but rather as a broader social and moral ideal that demands individuals to live together as "equals," free from hierarchy, oppression, or marginalization.[18]

On the other hand, although different theoretical models are possible, many prominent versions of relational egalitarianism, such as Anderson's democratic equality, seem to require less equality than Cohen's ideal of community.[19] This is because even if a society succeeds in eliminating oppression, marginalization, exploitation, domination, and status hierarchy, unequal life experiences may still persist. Moreover, people may still think that others choose not to help them even when they are in a position to do

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[17] For an explicit argument asserting that Cohen's concept of community embodies core relational egalitarian concerns and that these two perspectives heavily overlap, see Tomlin (2014, p. 153). Furthermore, Lippert-Rasmussen (2018) argues that "to the extent that Cohen's idea of equality is animated by an ideal of community, he appears to subscribe to some form of relational equality and, thus, is best seen as someone who subscribes to both a distributive and a relational ideal of equality" (pp. 230–231).

[18] For various interpretations of this ideal in the relational egalitarian literature, see Anderson (1999, pp. 288–289), who defines "democratic equality" negatively as the abolition of oppression and positively as the construction of a community of equals; Scheffler (2003, pp. 21–22; 2005, p. 17), who characterizes equality as a moral ideal governing human relations and argues that such relations should not be structured by differences of rank, power, or status; Wolff (1998, pp. 106–108), who associates the egalitarian ideal with a society grounded in mutual respect and trust and free from policies that undermine citizens' self-respect; David Miller (1999, p. 232), who emphasizes "equality of status" and rejects placing persons in hierarchically ranked categories; and Rondel (2007, p. 122), who approaches equality through a pragmatist lens and understands it as a broad moral and democratic ideal rather than a purely distributive metric.

[19] For the view that Anderson's "democratic equality" requires less distributive equality by permitting significant resource inequalities once a sufficient threshold for equal citizenship is met, see Anderson (1999, p. 326) and King (2018, p. 227). By contrast, some other relational egalitarians argue for much stricter limits on distributive inequality. Christian Schemmel (2011, p. 375), for instance, contends that relational egalitarianism gives rise to a "presumption of equality in social goods" and therefore demands firmer restrictions on income and wealth disparities. For a discussion on how Schemmel's approach leaves a much narrower range of permissible inequalities than most other relational egalitarian accounts, see also Tomlin (2014, pp. 176–177).

so. Therefore, Cohen's value of community often appears to require a greater degree of equality than relational egalitarianism demands. Furthermore, naturally, Cohen's ideal of community distinguishes itself by demanding not merely equal respect, status, or standing, but crucially, that individuals genuinely care for and about one another.

Ultimately, however, despite the limitations of certain prominent versions, relational egalitarianism remains fundamentally an egalitarian framework, and as such, its positive aim is deeply connected with the ideal of community. The fact that relational egalitarians inherently direct their efforts establishing a "society of equals" free from hierarchy and oppression actually reinforces the central claim of this study: that among all competing principles, certain forms and levels of egalitarianism provide the most robust foundation for bringing the value of community to life. Furthermore, the increasing focus of contemporary debates on relational approaches demonstrates that the sought-after equality is increasingly understood not merely as a distributive arithmetic, but as a relational ideal that strongly resonates with the life-enriching value of community, thereby corroborating the argument defended in this study.

Conclusion

Although community occupies only a modest place in current literature, it remains fundamental to human life. One can intuit its nature through the bonds shared among family members and close friends. Moreover, during special occasions such as religious holidays or large-scale natural disasters, one can observe how the value of community manifests across broader segments of society. These experiences offer a meaningful basis for understanding what community is, how it feels, and what kind of social life it can foster.

The value of community has a contested relationship with equality. Cohen, in particular, does not provide a clear framework for explaining how an unequal distribution poses a barrier to the value of community. In this paper, I propose a model that builds on two components to explain this. According to this model, a fundamental tension that undermines the flourishing of community arises from the combination of two elements: (1) different life experiences that are hierarchically structured, and (2) the belief among disadvantaged individuals that they are left without support. These objective and subjective components together exert a continuous strain on community, varying in severity with the degree of inequality. While community may sometimes flourish despite this strain, the structural tension remains present nonetheless.

The most direct way to relieve this strain created by economic distribution is to adopt an egalitarian principle of distribution. Principles such as utilitarianism, sufficientarianism, and limitarianism may yield good results in maximizing efficiency, combating poverty, or limiting ultra-wealth. However, none of them supports the value of community as robustly as egalitarianism does. Maximinist and especially prioritarian principles may be considered valuable because they avoid the levelling down objection often raised against egalitarianism. Yet when equality is defended as instrumentally valuable for community, it may, to some extent, entail levelling down. Moreover, although relational egalitarianism is typically less demanding than Cohen's

ideal of mutual care, its core insight that equality is fundamentally about interpersonal relationships strongly reinforces the premise that an egalitarian foundation is necessary for community. In conclusion, none of these principles proves to be as effective as egalitarianism in realizing the value of community. Thus, the value of community itself constitutes a powerful reason to prefer egalitarianism over its alternatives.

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