

# INCENTIVES, OFFERS, AND COMMUNITY

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## ABSTRACT

A common justification offered for unequal pay is that it encourages socially beneficial productivity. G. A. Cohen famously criticizes this argument for not questioning the behavior and attitudes that make those incentives necessary. I defend the communal status of incentives against Cohen's challenge. I argue that Cohen's criticism fails to appreciate two different contexts in which we might grant incentives. We might grant unequal payment to someone because they demand it. However, unequal payment might be an offer instead. I claim that incentives as offers promote the ideal of society as a cooperative venture for mutual advantage.

## KEYWORDS

Community; G. A. Cohen; Incentives; Inequality; Production

1. INTRODUCTION

One cause of inequality is that we pay some people more than others for their work. A common justification offered in defense of these payments is that they act as *incentives*. Unequal pay encourages productivity that benefits everyone. John Rawls (1999) provides a particularly famous variant of this argument. If granting inequality-creating incentives makes the least advantaged better off than they would be under a regime of strict equality, then justice licenses these incentives (Rawls 1999: 13-14). For the sake of convenience, I will label this family of arguments *the incentives argument*.

G. A. Cohen (2008) suggests a significant flaw in the incentives argument. It may be true that, all things considered, we should provide such incentives. However, if we care about benefitting the least advantaged, we should not leave unquestioned the motives of those we grant incentives. After all, why do the more advantaged need these incentives to be productive? How can the more advantaged *themselves* justify requiring unequal payment? Cohen suggests if the more advantaged would work from an egalitarian ethos instead of from extra payment, this would leave more of our joint social product available to distribute to the least advantaged. In this way, the incentives argument fails to hold the more advantaged responsible for their choices and behavior. From this observation, Cohen concludes that the incentives argument works to the extent that it excises the more advantaged from our moral community. While incentives might be a useful means of social regulation, they have no place in a community bound by a common moral project, or so says Cohen.

Many have come to the defense of the incentives argument. Defenses tend to come in three varieties. First, there are those who argue, contra Cohen, justice does not apply to the behavior of individuals, but instead to the institutions within which those individuals operate (e.g. Cohen 2001; Tan 2004). Second, there are those who argue that Cohen's robust egalitarian ethos runs up against ethical limits, such as those imposed by a personal prerogative or a publicity requirement (e.g. Estlund 1998; Williams 1998). Finally, there are those who suggest that Cohen simply gets justice wrong. If Cohen appreciated the importance of freedom to an account of justice, Cohen would realize that incentives are the just consequence of individuals exercising their freedom (e.g. Thrasher and Hankins 2015; Mackay 2016; cf. Casal 2013).

In this paper, I offer a novel fourth defense of the incentives argument that coheres more closely with Cohen's original criticism of the incentives argument than previous defenses. A central contention of Cohen's 1991 Tanner Lectures is that incentives offered in the name

of benefitting society are uncommunal as well as unjust (Cohen 1992).<sup>1</sup> In those lectures, Cohen describes how the incentives argument only works to the extent that we place the more advantaged outside of our “justificatory community” (Cohen 2008: 43-44). If we allow the more advantaged to place their preference to work harder conditional on receiving extra remuneration “off the table” in co-deliberation, we treat them (in part) as a feature of the natural landscape to work around rather than joint partners in social cooperation. This remains salient for evaluating the desirability of incentives, even if the above-mentioned arguments succeed.

One might think otherwise, and that the more advantaged could just justify unequal pay in reference to those arguments. Nonetheless, I suggest the more advantaged *still* cannot utter the incentives argument to other members of society without at least some reason for embarrassment. Consider:

*The More Advantaged:* “You should grant us these incentives for the sake of benefitting society.”

*Other Members of Society:* “Look, we get it. You can claim these incentives because of freedom or a personal prerogative or some other condition of justice.<sup>2</sup> That is all well and good. But stop patronizing us with all this talk of ‘benefitting society.’ Just come out and say we should grant you these incentives for *these* reasons. You certainly don’t want them for *our* sake.”

The point of this dialogue is to show that, even if the more advantaged are *right* to claim unequal payment for their productivity, it remains odd to say they claim such incentives for the benefit of society. There remains an uncomfortable gap between the purported social function of incentives and the reasons of those who accept such payments. To this extent, talk about institutions, prerogatives, freedom, and the like come across as conversation changers in this dialogue.

I argue that Cohen’s criticism suffers from failing to appreciate two different contexts in which we might grant incentives. We might grant unequal payment to someone because they *demand* extra remuneration. However, unequal payment might just be an *offer* instead of a concession to a demand. To put the distinction simply, an offer provides an opportunity for cooperation, whereas a demand attempts to get something for nothing. Because of this, offers (unlike demands) are not corrosive of community, but instead produce community.

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen is ambivalent about the relation of justice to community (Cohen 2008: 3-6; Cohen 2009: 37; see also Vrousalis 2015: 108-110).

<sup>2</sup> To be clear, I am not saying Cohen concedes this.

Given this, if incentives are offers, then they are not a lamentable piece of social technology. Such incentives promote the ideal of society as “a cooperative venture for mutual advantage,” to use Rawls’s phrase (Rawls 1999: 4).

To show the force of the offer/demand distinction, I respond to the objection that community requires more than what offers provide. The objection presses that community requires not only justificatory community, but also what Cohen calls “communal reciprocity,” or the idea that “people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another” (Cohen 2009: 34-35). The idea of communal reciprocity comes from Cohen’s thought experiment of the camping trip, as presented in his posthumously published *Why Not Socialism?* (Cohen 2009). Cohen uses this camping trip thought experiment to illustrate what he sees as the evils of market life in contrast with the goods of socialist community. Were we to organize a camping trip on market principles, Cohen suggests we would find not community, but mutual predation: From each the least he can get away with, to each the most he can get. The similarities between this later argument and the earlier argument against incentives are apparent. To respond to this objection, I present a twist on Cohen’s camping trip where inequality arises due to offers instead of demands. This twist reveals how offers produce communities of mutual respect and mutual benefit. Offers recognize individuals as having something to offer themselves, but, more importantly, help inform others what it means to have something to offer. If I am right, I have vindicated the incentives argument in an unexplored, yet important, manner.

## 2. INCENTIVES AS DEMANDS

In this section, I explain what it means to treat incentives as demands. I take Cohen as representative of this view. I want to emphasize that our focus is what Cohen calls the “unadorned” or “naked” version of the incentives argument (Cohen 2008: 47). We are setting aside arguments that justify incentives with reference to controversial moral principles such as desert or entitlement. An “adorned” argument might suggest, for example, that incentives are justified because they give people what they deserve. The unadorned argument, in contrast, justifies incentives not on the grounds that they track any moral value in the person granted the incentive, but instead that they provide social benefit. For example, in the Rawlsian argument, inequality-producing incentives to the more advantaged are justified because they improve the lot of the least advantaged.

Cohen suggests that offering the argument in these impersonal terms obscures an important element of responsibility (Cohen 2008: 35). The more advantaged stand to benefit from these unequalizing incentives supposedly granted for the sake of the least advantaged. Given this, can the more advantaged sincerely utter that they require incentives to be productive for the sake of the least advantaged *to the least advantaged*? Cohen claims that uttering such an argument would be cause for embarrassment for the more advantaged (Cohen 2008: 65-68). If the more advantaged *really* cared about the least advantaged, they would be productive without such incentives. By failing this “interpersonal test,” Cohen argues that the incentives argument only works to the extent that the more advantaged do not share community with the least advantaged (Cohen 2008: 41-46). To illustrate this point, Cohen analogizes providing incentives to the more advantaged to paying a kidnapper’s ransom (Cohen 2008: 38-41). While paying the rich or the kidnapper may be right all things considered, the rich or the kidnapper cannot sincerely justify receiving this payment given their responsibility for the situation. Given this, Cohen claims that only when the more advantaged are motivated by a robust egalitarian ethos in their daily behavior can they in good faith offer the incentives argument (Cohen 2008: 73). But, as Cohen observes, this essentially eliminates the need for the incentives argument. If a robust egalitarian ethos motivates the more advantaged, then there is no need for incentives to motivate them to be productive in the first place (Cohen 2008: 73-76; see also Cohen 2009: 61-63) It is worth spending more time on the kidnapper analogy to appreciate the nature of Cohen’s criticism of the incentives argument.

The structure of the kidnapper’s argument when uttered by the kidnapper to the parents is roughly this:

(1.1) You should have your child.

(1.2) Unless you pay me, I will not give you back your child

∴ (1.3) You should pay me.

Cohen points out that, when the kidnapper utters this argument to the parents of the child, he cannot sincerely justify its conclusion to the parents. This is because the kidnapper is responsible for the parents not having their child (Cohen 2008: 40). The kidnapper offers the argument in bad faith, for if he truly endorsed (1.1) he would not have kidnapped the child in the first place. To be clear, this observation does not bear on the validity or the soundness of this argument. Instead, failing of the interpersonal test bears on the relationship between the kidnapper and the parents. The kidnapper and the parents do not share what Cohen calls “justificatory community” (Cohen 2008: 43). By

feeling no need to justify making (1.2) true, the kidnapper is basically a “Martian” to the parents – a predictable being to work around, not a moral agent to engage in co-deliberation (Cohen 2008: 44).

Cohen’s case of the kidnapper is suggestive of how similar concerns about interpersonal justification arise for the incentives argument. First, consider the impersonal form of the incentives argument:

(2.1) The least advantaged should benefit.

(2.2) Unless we pay the more advantaged, they will not be productive so as to benefit the least advantaged.

∴ (2.3) We should pay the more advantaged.

Now, here is the same argument presented by the more advantaged to the least advantaged:

(2.1’) You should benefit.

(2.2’) Unless you pay us, we will not be productive so as to benefit you.

∴ (2.3’) You should pay us.

Put in these terms, Cohen points out that the incentives argument fails the interpersonal test in the same way that the kidnapper’s argument does (Cohen 2008: 41). For both the kidnapper and the more advantaged make it true that paying them produces the desired outcome. This is not something that they can justify. For Cohen, this means we can only accept the incentives argument at the cost of treating the more advantaged as not part of our community. By this, I mean that the incentives argument involves accepting that the more advantaged place themselves above justification (Cohen 2008: 44, 65). In doing this, the more advantaged mark themselves as adversaries to tolerate, not partners in a joint venture. As I noted in the introduction, this particular criticism of the incentives argument does not rest on justice, but on community. Because of this, we should understand what exactly it is about the failure of the interpersonal test in the case of the incentives that implicates community.

According to Cohen, the incentives argument fails the interpersonal test because the more advantaged fail to take responsibility for their motivations (Cohen 2008: 59-60). This is a failure for the more advantaged because (in the argument) they purportedly endorse the normative principle of helping the least advantaged. The strike against community on this picture, then, is that the more advantaged *fail to do their part*. Doing their part involves abiding by the normative principle

endorsed in the major premise: We ought to benefit the least advantaged. When the more advantaged utter the incentives argument to the least advantaged, they do not reference a cooperative activity that would be constitutive of a community or a “we.” Instead, using this principle in this context turns the incentives argument into a *demand* placed on others by the more advantaged: “Pay us!” Society, in turn, cannot ignore this demand because of the accompanying warning: “If we are not paid, we will not be productive.” Such a demand seems unfitting among members in a cooperative venture for mutual benefit.

Given the kidnapper case, you might think that what places the more advantaged beyond justificatory community is the coercive nature of the incentives argument. Like a kidnapper, the rich *threaten* society into paying them more. On this reading, the more advantaged strategically leverage their talents to acquire a larger share of the joint social product. However, interestingly enough, Cohen denies this reading of the incentives argument. For Cohen, the more advantaged’s utterance of the argument is a warning, not a threat (Cohen 2008: 59, 399-400). If it were a threat, the rich would adopt their preference to work harder conditional on receiving unequal payment *just because* they can leverage such a preference for more money. But, for Cohen, the more advantaged make their productivity conditional on unequal payment not as a way of strategically inducing behavior by others (Cohen 2008: 400). In Alan Wertheimer’s language, the more advantaged lack a “metaintention” to form an intention to work less conditional on receiving less pay (Wertheimer 1987: 98; see also Nozick 1997: 31-34).<sup>3</sup> To put this point another way: the more advantaged prefer to work less if they are paid less, and this preference is exogenous to whatever other actors might do. So while the more advantaged do not threaten society, their refusal to be held responsible for this preference places a demand upon society. Much like cranking up the speed on a treadmill makes our run more demanding, so too the more advantaged’s preference to work harder conditional on more pay makes benefitting society, and especially the least advantaged, more demanding.

To conclude this section, Cohen wants us to see incentives as acceding to the demands of the more advantaged. When we grant incentives to

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<sup>3</sup> An anonymous reviewer suggests I am wrong to say the rich lack such a metaintention given they reify their own intentions (Cohen 2008: 66-68). In response: It is not obvious to me that reification of an intention involves an intention to form those intentions in the first place. Reification is a way of depicting those intentions to others and, perhaps, to one’s self. Thus, I see no incoherence in Cohen both holding that the more advantaged lack a metaintention to form an intention to work harder conditional on more pay and that they reify their own intentions. The first claim involves a description of the source of one’s intentions, while the second involves how one depicts and understands those intentions.

encourage productivity, this is a concession to outsiders who are not co-members of our moral community. Were the more advantaged part of our moral community, they would be committed to the principle of benefitting the least advantaged. Such a commitment involves refraining from demanding extra payment for their efforts, and allowing the results of their productivity to be redistributed to benefit the least advantaged as much as possible. Insofar as incentives respond to demands, they corrode community. But are incentives necessarily tied to demands in this way? I suggest not. In addition to a way of coping with demands, incentives can also be *offers*.

### 3. OFFERS AND DEMANDS

In the following two sections, I argue that incentives understood as offers do not threaten community in the way demands do. Instead, incentives as offers make community possible. I will take a different tack here than I did in the last section. There, I began with Cohen's criticism of the incentives argument and used this to explicate demands. Here, I instead begin with an account of offers and then turn to the question of incentives. The reason for this reversal will become clearer as the argument develops.

We might begin with the understanding of offers present in the literature on coercion (e.g. Nozick 1997: 23-31). In this literature, an offer is a proposal that attempts to get someone to act in a particular way by improving his or her situation conditional on them behaving in the desired way. There is much debate about how to understand the relevant baseline of comparison, and about whether or not offers can ever be coercive (see Alexander 2015: sec. 2). However, this literature presents a fairly narrow, decision-theoretic account of offers. Such an account fails to account for the following examples of offering found in our ordinary language: We sometimes describe someone as "having something to offer" or "placing her wares on offer." These do not appear to describe how one person alters the payoff structure of a situation to induce particular behavior by another particular person. Instead, such uses of the term "offer" involve what someone brings to the table independent of particular intentions to induce particular actions from particular agents. For sure, bargaining is still involved in such offers, but they capture a wider set of phenomena that are not *exclusively* about bargaining. We can distinguish offers in these more broad strokes from the more technical sense found in the literature on coercion by calling the latter *offers in the narrow sense*. My interest here is not in strategic offers, but what is captured by these common phrases, or *offers in the broad sense* or, for convenience's sake, *offers*.



Offers involve an invitation to engage in a cooperative venture in which all parties stand to gain. A consequence of this is offers can be more open ended than offers in the narrow sense. Making an offer is an exploratory act. People often make offers in an effort to find partners in a joint productive activity. In this way, offers provide the social technology through which we get together and strike a deal with unknown others who have something to offer themselves. Of course, just making an offer does not guarantee that someone will take that offer. To be successful, an offer must appeal to potential partners. Otherwise, potential partners will simply walk away (if they can afford to - more on this in section 7). When successful, offers allow both parties to come home better off than they were otherwise. Offers share this much with offers in the narrow sense: they both involve positive-sum transactions. But offers in the broad sense are not just positive-sum transactions.

A valuable element of offers in the broad sense is that they help us seek out those who have something to offer themselves. What distinguishes offers in the broad sense from offers in the narrow sense is that there is a communicative element present in the former that is lacking in the latter. When I place an offer for someone to teach my child piano in my local newspaper's classified section, I am reaching out for someone who can help me. Likewise, the teacher who responds to my ad with an offer of her own is looking for someone who can help her. Offers in the broad sense not only involve positive-sum transactions, but also make those transactions possible insofar as they connect people. Offers help us recognize others as potential partners in joint productive activity that satisfies the wants and needs of those involved. In this way, what I am describing is an *ideal* of offers. Ideally, partners in a joint productive enterprise mutually affirm each other's role in such enterprise.<sup>4</sup> Mutual affirmation is not a necessary condition of positive-sum transactions, but an achievement we strive for within them.

Prior to moving on to incentives and offers, it might be worth contrasting offers with demands. A demand is not an invitation to engage in a mutually affirming joint endeavor. Instead, a demand attempts to *extract*. Demands involve an *adversarial stance*, or an orientation towards another that treats that other as someone to manipulate for personal gain rather than as a partner in a cooperative activity. To this extent, people who make demands do not care about the interests of the targeted party for their own sake. Demanders only care about the interests of their targets insofar as it may help in successful extraction. For example, a good blackmailer acquires

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<sup>4</sup> As David Schmidtz puts it, "Money is seldom the only thing shopkeepers want from their customers" (Schmidtz 2006: 89; see also Bruni and Sugden 2008).

information he knows will be deeply compromising for his target. Leveraging this information is how the blackmailer makes not just a demand for money, but also a threat.<sup>5</sup> For sure, blackmailing requires two parties to act in coordination. One party has to fork over the money while the other remains silent. But blackmailing is not a joint cooperative endeavor. The blackmailed wishes the blackmailer never existed (see also Nozick 1974: 84-86). In contrast, a good offer is one welcomed by the target. This is not to say that offers are always pleasant. If you make an offer on my house, I might not like your offer. Perhaps I had hoped for more. But my disappointment does not transform your offer into a demand. An offer remains an opportunity for cooperation, even if it is not the particular opportunity we wanted.

#### 4. INCENTIVES AS OFFERS

If an incentive is an offer, and not just a concession to a demand, this will change our evaluation of such incentives. Offering an incentive is a way of *forming* a community. It invites others to partake in the joint activity of production. Further, this activity benefits the least advantaged. To preview the coming argument, I suggest it is not right to compare the more advantaged with kidnapers as Cohen does. We are all better off with the more advantaged given their talents and productivity. Making offers to the more advantaged makes it pay to be more advantaged in our community. This does not necessarily mean that the more advantaged are entitled to the *full* rewards of these offers. Nonetheless, the main claim remains: We get *more* more advantaged when we make it pay to be more advantaged. I do not feel the same about kidnapers, and I suspect you do not either. We do not want to make it pay to be a kidnapper given *those* talents and abilities. Otherwise, we get more kidnapers in our “community.”

To see this, we have to decouple Cohen’s understanding of the interpersonal test from the value of community in this context. The problem with Cohen’s interpersonal test as applied to the incentives argument is that it assumes two static groups of people, the more advantaged and the least advantaged. If we personify the more advantaged as a single agent speaking to another agent, as Cohen does, then we get the embarrassing situation canvassed above. However, neither the more advantaged nor the least advantaged are a static group. They are *dynamic* groups. They are dynamic in the sense that what it means to be more advantaged shifts according to time and

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<sup>5</sup> Demands and threats are related, but not the same thing. A threat includes a demand, but a demand does not include a threat. So when the blackmailer says, “Pay me! Or, else” the “Pay me!” part of the disjunction that forms the threat is the demand

place. To be fair, Cohen acknowledges that the more advantaged is a “group with shifting membership” (Cohen 2008: 48). However, when he gets to the paragraphs where he claims to deal with this issue, he only deals with questions surrounding individual responsibility for group behavior (Cohen 2008: 53-54). There is no discussion of what it means for the well-off to be a dynamic group, and how this might impact the interpersonal test. Taking a dynamic approach, as opposed to a static approach, involves appreciating the mechanisms through which the more advantaged *become* more advantaged. How do the talented come to be talented in our community?

As Seana Shiffrin rightly emphasizes in her own criticism of incentives, an important element in the debate over the incentives argument is Rawls’s observation that one’s natural abilities are arbitrary from a moral point of view (Shiffrin 2010: 120-134). It is *this* observation that renders moral principles of desert or merit controversial and helps explain why the unadorned incentives argument appeals to defenders of incentives. But there is a deep truth in Rawls’s observation that is not fully appreciated. It is not just the genetic lottery, but also the cultural and historical lottery that influences our ability to command wealth and fortune. What abilities and talents people find valuable today are not the abilities and talents that they find valuable tomorrow. At one point, producing VHS tapes was something we wanted, but this is no longer the case. This illuminates an important point about productivity. It is not enough for people to be *blindly* productive, producing useless goods for no one. What we need is a way of directing people’s efforts, or a way of signaling what abilities our society wants cultivated. This is exactly what an offer does.

As noted, an offer provides an opportunity for cooperation. But, importantly, we do not make offers just to anyone. *We make offers to those who have something to offer themselves.*<sup>6</sup> Because of this, offers direct attention to what we want offered. This deserves emphasis. Cohen begins with the assumption that the more advantaged have the most to offer, and use this to their advantage to demand unequal payment. I suggest this gets things quite backwards. The more advantaged come to have the most to offer *because they follow the offers*. By this, I mean something like the Hayekian point that price signals provide information to individuals regarding how to develop and deploy their abilities (Hayek 1945). However, missing in the abstraction of a “price signal” is the human element that creates these signals. Such signals emerge from people’s offers. In this way, a system of offers produces

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<sup>6</sup> To reiterate, “having something to offer” involves what someone brings to the table independent of particular intentions to induce particular actions from particular agents. In this way, having something to offer is not either a broad offer or a narrow offer. Instead, it places someone in a position to make offers in either sense.

the community of production we are investigating in the first place. When placed in a system of offers, people do not go around making demands without having anything to offer. Instead they focus on having something to offer so they can make deals with others. What is good about offers, then, is not just that they are positive-sum, but that, without them, we do not know how to be productive.

I suggest that the problem incentives provide a solution to is not that of divvying up some pre-existing joint social product, but the problem of how the product gets produced in the first place. Because the more advantaged themselves are a product of the very incentives we are subjecting to scrutiny, the static modeling that Cohen bases his interpersonal test on is improper. We need an interpersonal test that takes seriously how the groups are fluid, and the role that offers play in producing those groups. Here is a stab at such a test: What if instead of the more advantaged speaking to the least advantaged as they presently stand, we have them co-deliberate about what system of rules would produce the best outcome for everyone. Each person takes into account how different systems of rules induce different strategies and patterns of behavior.<sup>7</sup> Some systems produce free riding and exploitation, while others cooperation and reciprocation. Under this test, providing incentives does better than the alternatives because it involves making offers to those who have something to offer. This makes it pay to have something to offer. Rejecting incentives makes it pay to demand without having anything to offer. The more advantaged and the least advantaged can in good faith ask each other to abide by these rules because these are the rules that produce a community of producers, rather than a community of free riders (would it make sense to even call such a group a community?).<sup>8</sup> Each would accept these rules were the roles reversed.<sup>9</sup>

One potential objection to my argument is that it proves too much. By focusing on offers generally, I have said nothing about the *size* of offers. It might be thought that my argument essentially licenses incentives of any size. Cohen's initial presentation of the incentives argument takes place in the context of determining whether we should opt for a 40% or 60% tax rate (Cohen 2008: 34-35). Does it follow from my argument that the more advantaged are entitled to the *full*

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<sup>7</sup> This strategic way of evaluating moral systems is indebted to David Schmidtz (2017).

<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that even in a community of producers there will not be those who simply have nothing to offer. Of course there will be. I am not saying those people are unfairly free riding, and I am not saying that we owe those people nothing. That said, it is beyond the scope of the paper to outline what that might be.

<sup>9</sup> As some may have noticed, this argument backs us into a variation of Rawls's veil of ignorance.

rewards of these offers, and thus we should always opt for the lowest possible tax rate, even 0%? I suggest not. The point of my intervention in this debate is to vindicate the communal credentials of incentives, not provide particular guidance as to the size of those incentives. As I pointed out earlier, it is important to note that Cohen's criticism cuts against incentives designed to encourage productivity *no matter the size*.<sup>10</sup> The offer/demand distinction combats *that* claim. For now, I leave it an open question how best to manage a system of offers. That being said, it would be remiss of me if I did not acknowledge that my arguments do have implications for that question. It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate this in any detail, but let me gesture towards how this might go.

What is important on this view is not so much the inequality, but how the inequality comes about. Suppose I bring my child to an accomplished piano teacher. She tells me her studio is full, and that she cannot accept any more students. I plead with her that my child is really worth the effort. Given her position, the piano teacher has a number of options. One thing she could do is leverage her position to extract triple her normal rate from me. In such a situation, the piano teacher only considers the opportunity costs of taking an additional student and what price would make it worth her while, failing to consider her partner in the exchange. Another thing the piano teacher could do is, meet with my child and say, "Having met with your child, I see he is quite committed and has a spark of talent that is worth encouraging. Because of this, I will take on your child as an extra student" with no discussion of increased price. What the piano teacher does here is include in her practical deliberations the interests of the child. There is a difference between being a crude maximizer in one's dealings and keeping an eye towards acknowledging one's exchange partner as a partner. Again, this is only a sketch of an argument that filling out

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<sup>10</sup> With two qualifications. First, Cohen suggests inequality might be acceptable if it is *strictly* necessary to benefitting the least advantaged. That is, incentives are justified when they are intention-independent (the more advantaged "can't" be more productive at less income, as opposed to "won't"). (Cohen 2008: 68-69. See also Vrousalis 2015: 104-106). Second, inequality might be justified insofar as we must make tradeoffs between community and other values, such as efficiency (recall my discussion of Cohen's value pluralism in footnote 1). A reader might worry that acknowledging these qualifications collapses the distance between my position and Cohen's. In regards to the first qualification, offers show that Cohen's understanding of "won't" obscures the source of the inequality in question (does it result from a demand or an offer?). In regards to the second qualification, Cohen's criticism of the incentives argument still generates some reason to disapprove of or perhaps lament such inequality. If only we did not have to make the trade-off between community and efficiency! My argument suggests we do not have to make such a trade-off.

would take us far afield. Though, this sketch suggests another objection.

A defender of Cohen might seize on these suggestions to protest that I am providing a distinction without a difference. The defender would suggest I have failed to appreciate the difference between what Cohen calls the information function and the motivation function of prices (Cohen 2009: 61). Once we see this distinction, we will see Cohen has no problem with offers. Indeed, Cohen may endorse offers insofar as they help direct our efforts in just the ways I have sketched out. However, Cohen has a problem with *keepings*.<sup>11</sup> It is one thing to make and take offers. It is quite another to be entitled to the rewards of those offers. On this view, my offers are in fact responses to demands, just implicit ones. The talented might be reluctant to develop or exercise their abilities on the hope that someone will offer them something to make it worth their while. Everyone knows this is what's going on, and so everyone understands that the offer is a way of coaxing those reluctant talented. This is just a demand by another name, so the objection goes.

For the Cohenite, community does not involve a system of offering and having something to offer in return, but instead what Cohen calls in later work *communal reciprocity*. Communal reciprocity is a condition where “people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another” (Cohen 2009: 34-35). If communal reciprocity holds, we have no need for offers beyond what they signal. Once an offer makes us aware of the presence of a human need, the good done by fulfilling this need of others should be sufficient to producing a community of joint production. Further, the Cohenite might point out that, if we need the reward attached to an offer, this indicates that we lack a properly communal disposition. A good community member does not reflect on whether or not an offer is sufficiently tempting, but fulfills the need in question.

This is an important objection that will take some time to address. Providing a satisfactory response requires me to engage with the thought experiment behind Cohen's idea of communal reciprocity: The camping trip. I will present my own twist on the camping trip to show the force of the offer/demand distinction. It is only when the force of the offer/demand distinction is appreciated in this context can I show fully how offers fulfill the promise of developing community.

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<sup>11</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for this way of formulating the issue.

## 5. COHEN'S CAMPING TRIP

Cohen invites us to imagine a camping trip among friends (Cohen 2009: 3-11). On this camping trip, we engage in a diverse set of activities, sharing goods and time as necessary. We conduct ourselves according to “norms of equality and responsibility” (Cohen 2009: 5), ensuring that each person has equal opportunity to flourish. Though this is close to our ordinary ideas about camping trips, there are other possibilities for organizing such a trip. Instead of a camping trip fused with the spirit of community and equality, we could run our camping trip by the principles of market exchange and private property. On Cohen's version of a market-based camping trip, we share goods and time only on the condition of receiving extra remuneration in return. Cohen claims that we would prefer the communal camping trip to the market-based camping trip “primarily on grounds of fellowship” (Cohen 2009: 6). Cohen drives this point home by describing various cases where members of the camping trip leverage either their talents or good fortune to demand extra remuneration. For instance, Harry, an excellent fisherman, contributes more than others to the fishing of trip (Cohen 2009: 7-8). On these grounds, Harry demands special treatment in the form of reserving for himself only the best selection of fish.

These two camping trips provide contrasting visions of human relations in production and distribution. On the original camping trip, we contribute as is necessary for the good of the enterprise by engaging in “planned mutual giving” (Cohen 2009: 10). Contrast this with the market-based trip, where participants contribute only in so far as they receive compensation. Based on this comparison, Cohen distinguishes between a “communal form of reciprocity” and a “market form of reciprocity” (Cohen 2009: 38). Communal reciprocity is that I serve not because of what I may get in return, but for the sake of serving you. Likewise, you serve me for the sake of serving me, without an eye towards what I can do for you (Cohen 2009: 39). Market reciprocity, in contrast, involves a solely instrumental outlook to exchange. I do not serve you for the sake of serving you. Rather, I serve you solely on the basis of material gain (Consider Harry's behavior on the market-based camping trip).

Cohen pairs this account of market reciprocity with a claim that market motivations boil down to greed and fear: “I serve others *either* in order to get something I desire – that is the greed motivation; *or* in order to ensure that something that I seek to avoid is avoided – that is the fear motivation” (Cohen 2009: 42). This sort of relationship undermines the value of community because it requires us to view others as either sources of potential wealth or potential threats to one's success, and “[t]hese are horrible ways of seeing other people, however much we have become habituated and inured to them, as a result of centuries of

capitalist civilization” (Cohen 2009: 40-41). On the one hand, we might think Cohen’s primary worry involves the motives he sees as driving behavior on the market-based camping trip: greed and fear. His later comments about “how we should never forget that greed and fear are repugnant motives” (Cohen 2009: 77) suggest that what is objectionable about markets are the motives they promote. This is the most common interpretation of Cohen’s point. Much has been written on whether or not Cohen is right to attribute these sorts of motives to market actors.<sup>12</sup> I do not believe Cohen has a naïve causal view about the relationship between markets and motives. He acknowledges that greed and fear do not motivate literally *everyone* on the market (Cohen 2009: 59). If we remember Cohen’s criticism of the incentive argument, however, we can better understand the argument.

The behavior of Harry, on Cohen’s camping trip, and the more advantaged, in Cohen’s presentation of the incentives argument, is identical. Both Harry and the more advantaged make their productivity conditional on receiving an unequal share. Based on this, I suggest Cohen’s claim is that markets, like incentives, involve treating others in ways incompatible with living together on morally acceptable terms (see also Vrousalis 2010: 211-213). Consider Cohen’s description of handling on the market:

The capitalist market does not, of course, require people to handle people roughly, but... the market does require people to *handle* people, to manage them, in a particular sense.... Business is, among other things, people treating people according to a market norm – the norm that says they are to be dispensed with if they cannot produce at a rate which satisfies market demand. (Cohen 2000: 181)

On Cohen’s account, market relations express greed in the sense that you become a means to *my* ends – your ends from the perspective of market exchange are merely instrumental. Market relations express fear in the sense that, if I fail to see you and act towards you in these ways, my well-being is at stake. I could be taken for a sucker at best, or lose out on my livelihood at worst. Worse still, my market partner is in the

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<sup>12</sup> I agree with critics that, *if* this is Cohen’s argument, it is either question begging or requires empirical verification (Krause 2010: 885; Brennan 2014: 57-69; Van Schoelandt 2014: 149-151). But, as you will see, I do not think this is Cohen’s argument, or at least I do not think it is his main argument.



same position that I am in: she must act towards me in ways expressive of greed and fear. Thus, market *reciprocity*.

## 6. A DIFFERENT CAMPING TRIP

To take stock: Community involves living together on mutually acceptable terms. The objection we are considering is that incentives, even as offers, involve treating others as merely means. If we take seriously our moral community, we would not need the reward presented by an offer, even if we accept that offers provide useful information regarding where efforts ought to be deployed. Cohen's camping trips help illustrate these issues. The market-based trip is one where we see others as sources of wealth – we demand as much as possible to enrich ourselves. It does not matter to us how this impacts others. What matters is how much we stand to gain. Like in his discussion of incentives, Cohen objects to how this sort of treatment involves treating others as features of the natural landscape to work around, not co-members of a moral community.

It is true that we can conceptually separate the signals an offer provides from the reward or payment promised by such an offer. Nonetheless, it seems odd to call an offer sans the offered good, well, an *offer*. For example, suppose you respond to my ad in the paper to teach my child piano, and we both agree \$20/hour is a fair price. Now suppose we live in a society where income is taxed at 100% ex post, so we both also know that your \$20/hour is taxed at 100% and redistributed such that each of us ends up with equal disposable income when all is said and done (e.g. Carens 1981). Now, it is true that I made you an offer in some sense. By denying the target of the offer any keepings, such an offer appears to be missing something fundamental. Namely, you do not get what was offered in return for your services. An “offer” sans keepings seems closer to what we ordinarily call a request. A request is an attempt to get the target to do something for the one making the request without requiring something in return. Some may wonder what the distinction between a demand and a request is, given that they both appear to involve trying to get something for nothing. Here is the difference: A request offers the target an opportunity to co-deliberate. It makes sense to respond to a request by saying: “I would help you out, but I already have a prior engagement.” It is not clear such a response is fitting in response to a demand. Demands deny their targets such an opportunity to co-deliberate over what is to be done.

The objection re-described in terms of requests is as follows: Cohen does not deny the need for society to have in place a signaling system of directing productive efforts. What Cohen denies is that we are entitled to reap rewards from such signals. What a community of

production requires is not a system of offers, but a system of requests. A system where, when we are alerted to a need, we fulfill the need for the sake of fulfilling it independent of what we get in return.

We need to answer two important questions to evaluate this objection. First, is it right to understand offers with keepings as responding to implicit demands, an interpretation suggested by Cohen's market-based camping trip? And second, are requests as constitutive of community as Cohen suggests? In this section, I will argue that we should answer both of these questions negatively. To make this argument, I present my own amended version of Cohen's camping trip. Jason Brennan criticizes Cohen's camping trips as resting on a fallacy: It compares ideal socialism to non-ideal capitalism (Brennan 2014: 60). I do not have much to say about this methodological complaint, but I do think Cohen's market-based camping trip does capture the crude, heartless reciprocity found in a society of demands independent of its accuracy as a model of market society. Inequality arises because you *demand* I pay you, and it is not important to you that we understand ourselves as engaged in a shared activity. In contrast, my amended camping trip depicts the other side of the coin. Instead of inequality arising due to demands, what would it look like if such inequality arises due to offers? Recall Harry, the talented fisherman. On Cohen's socialist camping trip, Harry receives no more than his fellow campers. He receives the same mix of fish that everyone else does. Now, on Cohen's market-based camping trip, Harry demands more for himself, and this triggers a kind of repugnance. "Who is *he* to demand more? How dare he!" But consider the following camping trip.

We are going on a camping trip. I wonder to myself – what do we need to have a good time? While eating some of the gruel we packed with us, it hits me: Some fish would liven up the meals! But, I am not quite sure who is good at fishing, even though I at least know I am pretty horrible at it. To solve this problem, I tell everyone,

"Look, I think it would be a good thing if we had some fish. So let me make you all an offer. Whoever fishes the most can get some of my select portions above and beyond the ordinary allotment."

On my camping trip, Harry does not know he is a talented fisherman, nor do we. So, when Harry hears my offer, he perks up. He thinks to himself,

"I haven't thought about fishing before. I am not even sure if I am any good at fishing. Nonetheless, why don't I give it a shot? It would be nice to have some excellent fish, and I would be helping everyone else out at the same time!"

After all the fishing is said and done, it turns out, to his surprise and ours, that Harry is indeed the best fisher. Thanks to his efforts, we have quite a bit of fish to enjoy on our trip. At the end of it all, I say,

“You’ve done quite a bit for us all, Harry. As offered, here are some of my select portions. Well done!”

Harry graciously accepts my select portions, and we are able to enjoy the rest of our camping trip, enriched by Harry’s offering. Rather than merely speak highly of Henry’s excellences, I put my money where my mouth is. This makes a difference not only to me, but also to Harry. Harry, knowing that his contribution meant something to me, can take further pride in the exercise of his talents to benefit all of us on the camping trip. Because of my offer, Harry now understands his contribution in a way he did not before. Understanding his place in our cooperative venture, he is better able to direct his talents and abilities.

It is difficult to make moral sense of this exchange on Cohen’s picture of community.<sup>13</sup> My offer may be permissible, but no more than that. There is nothing praiseworthy about my decision to offer Harry more for his services on the Cohenian view. Nor would Harry seem to have a reason to feel pride in accepting my offer. Such pride would imply that fulfilling a need was not enough for his sense of belonging. If we follow the distinction between signaling and motivating features of incentives, it would appear the thing to do would be to redistribute the offer *ex post*. Better still – Harry should abstain from keeping my offer in the first place.

These observations reveal how odd it is to take requests and their fulfillment as the core of community. Requests are like demands in that they ask nothing of the one making the request. Requests and demands are not invitations to partake in a joint activity, but instead are speech-acts that seek to get something without needing to offer anything in return. To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with this aspect of requests. I would even endorse the stronger claim that requests play an important role in maintaining communal relationships. What does it say about me if I make *all* of my contributions to my community conditional on receiving something in return? What does it say about Harry if he *never* abstains from keepings? To broaden these questions to the issue of more advantaged in our society: What does it say about the more advantaged if they resist *all* attempts to tax their keepings?

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<sup>13</sup> While my offer may be compatible with communal reciprocity, it is not clear that Cohen’s preferred conception of justice, so-called luck egalitarianism, can even license other-affecting choices such as my offer (see Lazenby 2010).

It does not follow, however, that, because honoring requests plays a role in community, failing to honor *all* requests involves a lack of community. Requests start sounding like demands when they do not build on a pre-existing network of offering and having something to offer in return. To make this point: We all know of friends who constantly ask much of us, but never seem to help us when we are in need. When we realize this is what is going on, we tend to wonder if he or she was even our friend in the first place. We are not being uncommunal when we have such thoughts. I suggest it is *because* we value community we care whether or not our friends respect our contribution enough to make us offers, and not just request after request. Would it be communal for me to prod Harry into abstaining from keeping my offer? Would it be communal for some other camper to begrudge Harry if he keeps my offer? Surely there is some point where making demand after demand on the offers of others itself betrays a kind of acquisitiveness on the part of the potential beneficiary that goes against the spirit of community. Admittedly, I leave it indeterminate where that point is. That said, my purpose here is not to draw the line, but to argue that there is, in fact, a line to be drawn.

Marx said that in a society without alienated labor “our products would be like so many mirrors, out of which our essence shone” (Marx 2000: 132). One way of fleshing out this opaque comment is through the behavior of my camping trip. Harry’s contribution is reflected to himself in my decision to offer him more than an equal share. His contribution is reflected towards others insofar as they both enjoy and acknowledge it. This is not just a demand by another name. Offers, and not requests, are the bedrock of a community of production. Community does not require the sort of caring Cohen suggests, but instead an understanding of what we contribute in a society of producers. This is what offers provide.

## 7. FROM CAMPING TO CAPITALISM

Some may find my behavior towards Harry attractive, but question the extension of such a case to the issue at hand: the communal status of inequality created by incentives in large-scale capitalist societies.<sup>14</sup> The critic may note that my amended camping trip involves an idealization that abstracts from details. However, the critic will press that I have

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<sup>14</sup> Miriam Ronzoni (2012) offers a powerful criticism of Cohen’s use of the camping trip to derive normative conclusions about modern society. I intend my arguments in what follows to protect my camping trip from similar criticism.

set aside “details” which are actually significant problems.<sup>15</sup> In this section, I will defend the extension of my Harry case to the question of incentives against four objections.

One might object that, by focusing on one exchange, my camping trip unwittingly backs into the same problems that Cohen (1995: Ch. 1) pointed out in Nozick’s (1974: 161-163) famous Wilt Chamberlin example (see also Vrousalis 2015: 52-54). Specifically, it is one thing for inequality to arise due to my one offer to Harry. It is another thing for inequality to arise on the market. On the market, inequality arises in part due to multiple people independently paying the same agent for some service. Each individual actor may intend to pay that agent for this service, but they may not intend to pay that agent collectively with others. To put this objection in terms of my camping trip: Suppose after I give my offer to Harry, I learn that another camper, Leslie, did the same thing independently. It is plausible that, had I known that Leslie were to reward Harry, I might think twice about my offer.

In response, I agree that this is an important difference between my Harry-style case and market-generated inequalities. But I do not think it makes the gap between my camping trip and market society unbridgeable. The important point of my offer to Harry is how the inequality generated by the offer communicates the value of Harry’s contribution to Harry (and others). Further, this communicative aspect is built into the inequality. For example, if some other camper were to turn around and confiscate and redistribute my reward to Harry, I suspect both Harry and I would find ourselves alienated from the joint enterprise of the camping trip. In regards to the question of incentives more generally: While it might be true that collectively we do not want certain amounts of inequality, this is perfectly compatible with my defense of offers. As I noted earlier, my claim is not that offers entitle people to the full rewards granted by those offers. Instead, the point is that, given that the task of production is dynamic, offers make it pay to bring something to the table. This is part of what happens when I make Harry my offer. Making it pay to bring something table leaves it an open question how much we want to make it pay. But it still has to pay.

Second, it may be objected that the offers made on the market do not track any value or contribution worth promoting. In the words of the economist Frank Knight, “The product or contribution is always measured in terms of price, which does not correspond closely with ethical value or human significance” (Knight 1923: 597-598; see also Bird 2011: 124-125). Harry the fisherman might be excellent, but is Philip Morris so excellent? Large-scale markets do not track genuine

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<sup>15</sup> This is a significant risk of idealization (see Valentini 2009: 351-355; Schmidtz 2011: 775-778).

contributions in the way that my model of offering does, undermining the idea that incentives involve an invitation to engage in a joint activity.

To some extent, I agree with this observation. Surely some tastes and wants in modern capitalist society arise from manipulation, distortion, and/or track worthless goods (Consider my comparison between Harry and Philip Morris above). That being said, I believe there are two reasons to resist this objection. First, it is difficult to say when preferences are distorted and when they reflect “genuine” interests. We all have our own biases in regards to what is worth living for. Just because the readers of a paper like this find something worthless does not make it so. Nonetheless, even granting this point, a critic is likely to press on those situations where manipulation *does* occur. This leads to my second reason for resisting this objection: I believe it describes a *feature* rather than a bug of my discussion of the value of offers. For example, we might ask ourselves how does such manipulation arise? What drives people to manufacture demand for goods they know are harmful and worthless? Profit is a strong motive, but not unique to those who manufacture demand knowing they have nothing to sell. One thing we might consider is that manipulation is motivated by having nothing to offer. Having something to offer means you do not need to manipulate and distort, for you can stand on the strength of what you have to offer without needing to resort to such tactics. In this way, the ideal of offering helps us criticize those who would manipulate preferences in this manner. Such distortion is against the spirit of offering and having something to offer in return.

Third, offers are bilateral. However, markets do not involve simple bilateral transactions between individuals. When I pay for my groceries, my money does not directly go to the clerk, but to a firm within which the clerk is a member.<sup>16</sup> The reality of exchange and work is that it occurs largely within the context of hierarchical firms. What place does a seemingly nostalgic account of offering have in this sort of a world?

While this is an important observation, I believe my account of offering is amenable to it. It is certainly true that when I pay the cashier at the grocery store, I am not simply recognizing the cashier. But I am recognizing the firm she belongs to. If the firm properly recognizes her contribution to its operation, we can also say I recognize her as well, albeit indirectly. By making an offer to the firm, I make an offer to each of its members as engaged in a joint productive activity. But, this is only true to the extent that the firm in question respects the contribution of its members. So, in my example, if the grocery store

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Anderson (2015) makes clear the importance of not ignoring the firm in evaluating economic life.

does not honor the cashier's contribution and treats her in purely instrumental terms, this is a reason for me to find another grocery store.<sup>17</sup> Such firms are not interested in engaging in the joint activity of production, but in extracting as much as possible from their workers.

Finally, it might be objected that some people accept offers because they have no other choices. It would seem perverse to link community to the exploitative offers some argue are woven into the fabric large-scale capitalist markets (e.g. Vrousalis 2012: 155-160). This objection also draws on an observation I made earlier when giving my account of offering. As noted, offers produce communities insofar as they provide opportunities to engage in a joint productive activity. However, if one partner is forced by circumstance to accept an offer, it is not clear how that person will see herself as engaged in a joint activity. While she accepts the offer freely, she does not do so voluntarily given that she has no acceptable alternatives (Olsaretti 1998: 70-72). Offers in these circumstances trade on the vulnerability of the desperate, and to this extent are exploitative (Vrousalis 2013). Consider the situation of workers in sweatshops today – lacking acceptable alternatives, they work in deplorable working conditions (see also Kates 2015). While employers of such labor make offers, workers do not have the power to say no in a meaningful sense. It would be difficult to say that offers in this scenario produce the kind of joint productive activity that we could properly praise as communal.

In response, it is important to recall the scope of my argument here. I do not expect my discussion of offers to capture all the relevant moral questions facing economic life, complex as it is. My more modest goal is to make a case for why incentives may be justified by the lights of community. Some exchanges and transfers may be impermissible on grounds independent of my account of offering. For example, it may be that offers for certain goods undermines conditions of social equality, and should be blocked on these grounds (Satz 2010). That being said, while my analysis of offering cannot address all of these issues, it is not entirely silent on the question of the powerless and vulnerable. If the ideal is a community of production whereby people offer and have something to offer, the goal is to help empower the vulnerable to find themselves in a position where they do have real choices. I leave it an open question as to the best approach to doing this. But getting them to this position means leaving them with something to offer. The more people with something to offer, the better off we all are.

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<sup>17</sup> Additionally, proper recognition may require meeting further requirements outlined by some theory of labor justice outlining what employers owe their employees (e.g. proper work conditions). It is not important to specify that theory for the purposes of my argument.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The debate over incentives treats them as a lamentable piece of social technology, at best licensed by justice but not praised by it. It is tempting to think, “If only we were better people, we could live together without recourse to such crude forms of encouragement.” What I have attempted to do in this paper is show that incentives are not like giving into the demands of a kidnapper - they are not concessions we make to those fallen souls who do not partake in our community. Instead, incentives can be offers that produce and maintain that community. I am not sure if they are the only, or even the best possible, way of accomplishing this laudable goal. But even if they are not, it is worth recognizing the role of offers in producing valuable relationships. Attending to permissible ways of getting others to do what justice requires is surely important, but it should not be our only concern. Otherwise, we risk spending all of our time focusing on how to make demands of one another, rather than working on having something to offer one another. This leaves no one with anything to offer. That would be a tragedy.

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