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Author(s): David Miller
Source: *Ethics*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (Apr., 1992), pp. 555-593
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/2381840
Accessed: 13-08-2018 00:23 UTC

Distributive Justice: What the People Think*

David Miller

This article attempts to bring together in a creative way two bodies of literature that often seem to run on parallel tracks with only the barest mutual acknowledgment. One is the steadily expanding range of works in political theory on social or distributive justice.[1] The other is the body of empirical work on people's beliefs about justice and the expression of these beliefs in practice. One might expect there to be a fruitful symbiosis between these two bodies of research, with political theorists setting the agenda for empirical studies of justice, while the results of these studies were fed back into the theoretical literature as data against which more abstract claims about the nature of justice could be tested. But this is not the case. There is a small amount of traffic across the border in one direction. Most empirical researchers are aware of the major landmarks in the field of theory—they have heard of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971), for instance, and a few experiments (discussed below) have been devised to test its claims. But almost without exception political theorists have failed to consider the bearing that empirical findings might have on their formulations.[2]

There are several reasons for this neglect, of greatly differing character and strength. One is simply the insularity of academic disciplines. Much of the research I shall consider is found in journals that no political theorist would look at as a matter of course. Along with this goes an unfamiliar academic jargon and a style of presentation which (in the case of the social psychology literature, especially) is likely to seem unusually wooden and ponderous. Then there is the view that empirical studies of justice are of little value in getting at

* I am very grateful to Geoff Evans, Bob Goodin, Chandran Kukathas, Robert Lane, Adam Swift, and Andrew Williams for their many helpful comments on an earlier version of this article, and not least for the suggestion that its previous title was misleading.

1. I have reviewed recent work in this area in Miller 1991.

2. One important exception is Soltan (1987), who uses evidence from job evaluation schemes to develop an account of justice in the distribution of income. Soltan's work is considered in Miller 1991, pp. 377–78.

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what people really think about this subject, because they are either carried out in artificial situations (laboratory experiments) or else are hopelessly superficial (survey research). Along with this goes the belief that the theorist has access to a ready-made data set in the form of his or her own beliefs and intuitions about what is socially just. More radically, the whole program may be challenged on the ground that popular beliefs about justice are one thing, a correct theory of justice quite another. Empirical research may simply turn up a distorted set of ideas, biased by individual or class interest, cognitive failures of one kind or another, etc.

The last challenge raises fundamental questions about the nature of political theory and its relationship to pretheoretical understandings of the social world which cannot be considered at any length here. I will, however, try to say a little more at the end of this article about the general relevance of empirical research of the kind surveyed here to normative theory. Let us note meanwhile that few contemporary political theorists would wish to draw such a sharp line between common opinion and theoretical truth. Most would claim in one way or another to incorporate and systematize existing beliefs about justice in their theoretical constructions. Michael Walzer (1983) has perhaps gone furthest in claiming that the theorist's task is not to criticize common beliefs from some distant vantage point but to articulate a historically shifting world of meanings from within. John Rawls's notion of 'reflective equilibrium' expresses a more typical view: it involves drawing a line between firmly held beliefs, which our theory of justice must respect and embody, and others about which we are less certain, where we are prepared to look to the theory for guidance (Rawls 1971, chap. 1, sec. 9). Whether one is inclined to follow Walzer's lead or Rawls's, in either case the theorist should welcome evidence of firmly and consistently held beliefs about justice as data against which prospective theories of justice may be tested.

The more specific grounds for skepticism center on the quality and relevance of the empirical work that has been done. Let me consider this briefly. It may be helpful to divide the empirical research along two dimensions. First there is the contrast between justice in small-group contexts—distributions among, say, two, three, or four people—and justice across whole societies—say, questions about the overall pattern of income distribution in Britain or the United States. Then there is the contrast between beliefs about justice—what people will say is just or fair—and their behavior when asked to allocate some valuable resource. Together these give us four possible ways of focusing research. In a small-group setting, it is possible either to ask people to assess a distribution—say, a distribution of rewards following the carrying out of some task by the members of the group—or else to perform the distribution themselves. On a societywide scale, beliefs

can be examined by, for instance, presenting people with different arrays of income distributions and asking them how fair they think they are, and behavior by looking at how institutions do in practice allocate resources—for instance, by considering how firms set pay scales for their employees. Each approach has its strengths and its weaknesses as a way of getting at what people really think about justice. If expressed beliefs are the focus of research, there is a danger of picking up what might be called "Sunday-best" beliefs, that is, the views that people think they ought to hold according to some imbibed theory as opposed to the operational beliefs that would guide them in a practical situation.[3] If behavior is the focus, on the other hand, then we are likely to find mixed motives at work, with the attempt to do justice contaminated, for instance, by self-interest. Thus an allocator in a small-group situation may distort justice to get more reward himself (on the other hand, as some experiments suggest, he may bend justice in the other direction in order to be seen to be generous to his co-members). Again, pay scales in industry are likely in practice to represent a compromise between what is seen as relative justice between employees and the bargaining power of different groups of workers (see Elster 1989 for an analysis of this kind). Along the other dimension, small-group research gives the researcher the greatest freedom to set up the experiment so that unwanted influences are excluded but raises the question how relevant distributive decisions in small groups are to wider questions of social justice: do people in fact use the same criteria when allocating resources among two or three individuals as they do when assessing, let us say, the justice of a capitalist economy?[4] On the other hand, looking directly at beliefs about macro-justice runs the risk of introducing too much contextual constraint into the answers that people give. For instance, if we ask people what an ideally fair distribution of income across society would be, their answers may be influenced by their perceptions of the current distribution; or if we ask them what responsibility society has to meet people's needs, they may draw for their answers on existing welfare practices.

3. Another possibility is that the opinions of people who are not used to thinking systematically about questions of justice will be ill thought out and therefore contradictory. This seems to me less worrying, because provided there are consistent general trends in popular belief, a minority who give random or contradictory responses will appear simply as "noise" to be discounted.

4. More generally, it has been suggested (Brickman et al. 1981) that people may apply one criterion of justice when considering how resources are allocated individual by individual and another criterion when looking at the overall distribution that results (e.g., an allocation that gives each person what he or she deserves may be judged to be excessively inegalitarian overall). I am not myself convinced that the macro-considerations at stake here are necessarily considerations of justice—they may, e.g., involve an ideal of social equality that is independent of justice.

This suggests that we must always be cautious in the inferences we draw from any particular piece of research about distributive justice, and that we should look particularly for convergence in findings that are arrived at in different ways, in terms of the micro/macro, beliefs/behavior matrix. I shall attempt here to unearth such common elements in the research that has been carried out and to present them in a way that makes clear their relevance to political theory. This involves some processing of the raw material so that it becomes available in a form that bears more directly on debates current in that field, and clearly there are dangers as well as potential benefits in this undertaking.

My focus will be on distributive justice in the sense in which it is contrasted both with retributive and with procedural justice. That is to say, I shall be looking at what people believe to be a fair allocation of valuable resources such as income and marks of prestige, and not at penalties or punishments, and I shall be looking at outcomes rather than at the procedures through which they arise. It is worth noting, however, that both retributive and procedural justice have been attracting increasing attention in recent work in social psychology (see esp. Lind and Tyler 1988), and one might look forward eventually to seeing an integrated theory of justice drawing upon all this material.

After these preliminary remarks, let me now begin to examine what research can reveal about people's ideas of distributive justice. On the working hypothesis that there is a considerable degree of convergence among these ideas, at least if we are considering the denizens of advanced industrial societies, I shall mainly be looking for common elements. Most of the empirical material that I shall consider refers to American subjects, since it happens that the research has been concentrated in the United States. Toward the end I shall consider whether any systematic differences in beliefs can be found if subjects are divided by sex, class, or nationality (these are obviously not the only divisions that might be examined, but they seem likely to be the most important).

I

My inquiry will be guided by the assumption that beliefs about justice are pluralistic, in the sense that they cannot all be accounted for by reference to a single basic principle of distribution; rather, when people are asked to assess the justice of some allocation of goods, they typically invoke several criteria of distribution and reach an overall judgment by balancing these criteria against each other.[5] I employ this assumption

5. Note that beliefs about distributive justice might be pluralistic in several different senses. The strongest sense would require that judgments of justice always invoke multiple criteria. A weaker sense would employ the idea of domains of distribution: the claim here is that people distinguish between different settings in which judgments

partly because it corresponds to my own preferred analysis of the idea of social justice but partly also because most empirical researchers in this area work on the basis of a similar assumption.[6] Some earlier research was influenced by the postulates of equity theory, which maintained that all "justice behavior" could be explained in terms of one underlying formula, namely, that there should be a constant ratio between each person's returns and his or her "inputs" or "investments." However, it turned out that the truth of this theory could be maintained only by allowing a great deal of flexibility over what could count as an input or an investment. Instead, it was more fruitful to reserve the term 'equity' for a subset of justice considerations, namely, those in which people were felt to deserve reward in proportion to their contributions (say, the amount they had contributed to some collective task) and to admit alongside the equity principle either or both of two others: the principle of equality and the principle of distribution according to need.[7] Another way of putting this (perhaps more familiar to political theorists) would be to say that there are three independent criteria that seem to be at work when people make judgments of justice, namely, desert, equality, and need. The task of empirical research is then to discover what these criteria amount to in practice, under what circumstances each is used, and what their relative strengths are when choices have to be made. Alongside these three principles a fourth is sometimes considered, namely, Rawls's difference principle (resources should be distributed so that the least-advantaged recipient gets the greatest possible amount).

Focusing for the present on desert, equality, and need, it is worth noticing an asymmetry between desert and need on the one hand and equality on the other. Using desert or need criteria to make judgments of justice implies a positive commitment to these criteria; you must feel that a person's deserts or needs make a positive relevant difference to the way they ought to be treated. In the case of equality, on the other hand, there is potentially always an ambiguity: is equality being valued as positively the right thing in the circumstances, or is it being chosen by default, as it were, in the absence of reliable information

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have to be made and employ different criteria in different settings. Finally, we might, following Michael Walzer (1983), separate different social goods and maintain that each good has its own criterion of just distribution.

6. Miller 1976, which identifies three basic and potentially competing criteria for assessing the justice of an allocation of resources. Note, however, that although two of these criteria—desert and need—have been used extensively in empirical research, the third—rights—has not been. This seems to me to represent something of a gap in the research so far carried out. ("Rights" here refers to the claims people have by virtue of established laws and practices irrespective of personal desert or need.)

7. This threefold classification goes back to Deutsch 1975; for a fuller statement see Deutsch 1985.

about desert or need? If you are told that several people have made different contributions to achieving some goal but are not told how big those contributions are—or do not have much faith in the information you have been given—you may opt for equality as the fairest distribution in the circumstances. Exactly the same reasoning applies in a case where needs may be different but you do not have reliable information about what the differences are.[8] Thus, where we find people opting for equality in preference to one of the other two principles, we need to judge as best we can what the basis of their preference is in the case in hand, and be alive to the possibility of equality being chosen by default.

There has been a large amount of research at the micro-level on the factors influencing people to prefer distribution according to desert on the one hand or equality on the other.[9] Typically, a situation will be presented in which a number of people have made different-sized contributions at some activity and respondents are asked to allocate income or other rewards or to say what they think a fair allocation would be. Sometimes subjects are made to believe that they are participants themselves; sometimes they are simply asked to make an external judgment. Contributions may be quantified so that subjects have the option of following a proportionality rule in rewarding them. Under these circumstances the general rule is that the subjects will take account of desert in allocating rewards, but their commitment to this principle is moderated by a number of factors.

These factors appear to operate through the perceived character of the group within which the distribution is to take place. To the extent that the group is seen as being made up of isolated individuals whose relationships to one another are simply instrumental, the desert principle is employed. To the extent that group solidarity emerges, the preferred distribution is shifted toward equality. Some experiments contrast team activities, such as football, with activities involving separate individuals, such as long-distance running. Asked to allocate bonuses to successful performers, people will opt for a greater degree of equality in the team case.[10] The assumption here, presumably, is that joint

8. It is fairly easy to show that this preference for equality is rational. Suppose you face the following situation: two people have been working on some task and their joint output is say, 100 units. However, you know nothing about how much each has contributed, so you regard any pair of inputs from 0, 100 at one extreme to 100, 0 at the other as equally probable. You now have to allocate 100 units of reward between these two people and you want to minimize the expected unfairness of the allocation, which we may take to be the number of units by which one or other is underpaid (or overpaid—the two quantities are the same). By dividing the reward equally between the two workers—50 units each—you minimize the greatest possible underpayment and by extension minimize the expected underpayment.

9. Helpful reviews include Leventhal 1976b; Mikula 1980; and Schwinger 1980.

10. See Törnblom and Jonsson 1987. One should note, however, that switching to a team context may also imply that individual contributions are harder to disentangle, so that equality may be preferred not so much as an expression of group solidarity but

activity creates a degree of camaraderie which makes greater egalitarianism appropriate. Similar results are found when subjects are given work tasks that are either competitive or cooperative in nature (see Griffith and Sell 1988; Lerner 1974; Schwinger 1980). Moreover, it can be shown that the experience of working cooperatively tends to shift people who originally favor the contribution principle toward greater support for equality (Deutsch 1985).

A second approach is to focus more directly on the quality of interpersonal relations within the group. This can be done either by characterizing the group as a group of friends or by feeding in information which suggests that members of the group share similar attitudes. Here again, respondents are drawn to equality in place of differential desert when distributing within like-minded groups (this effect is particularly marked in the case of those who have performed better and therefore stand to gain more from following the contribution principle; see Deutsch 1985, chap. 11; Mikula 1980, pp. 153–54). There is one qualification to this. Where the size of contributions depends on each person's efforts, fairness requires that people who make less effort should receive less reward (see Kayser and Lamm 1981). The explanation for this is presumably that in "friendship" contexts, there is a norm that each person should exert himself on behalf of the group, so people who fail to do so are properly punished by receiving less income. In contrast to instrumental settings, it is not that there is something positively valuable in reward being proportional to contribution; rather, free riders on the group's activity must be sanctioned.

Two further factors help to shift the criterion of justice that is applied from desert toward equality. One is expectations about how long the group will remain in being. Temporary groups tend to favor the contribution principle, whereas people who expect to interact with their partners in the future are more favorably disposed toward equality (see Mikula 1980 and Shapiro 1975). The other is discussion within the group. Groups who are permitted to decide for themselves which distributive principle to adopt are more likely to favor equality. Even being allowed to vote on choice of principle has this effect (see Deutsch 1985, chap. 10).

It seems fairly clear that these findings are picking up the same underlying contrast, referred to above, between "groups" which are made up of separate individuals either competing with one another or having merely instrumental relations and groups in which there is

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by default (see above). In the Törnblom and Jonsson experiment, the contribution principle was operationalized in the proposal that bonuses should be allocated to goal scorers, whereas people who know about soccer might reasonably think that winning depends on the whole team's performance, while who scores the goals is largely a matter of chance (and assigned position). There is less ambiguity in the work experiments referred to below.

a sense of common identity and solidarity. For groups of the first kind, justice is done when what each takes out is proportional to what he or she has put in, whereas groups of the second see equal distribution regardless of inputs as appropriate (since we have not yet considered cases where need differences are relevant, it is not so far clear whether equality is being valued per se or whether it is being used as a proxy for distribution according to need). This general result also has an interesting converse, namely, that when people are asked to choose the principle of distribution which they think most likely to realize specified group goals, people who are instructed to raise efficiency and productivity, etc., suggest the contribution principle, whereas those asked to promote group harmony and good working relations, etc., will opt for equality (see Leventhal 1976a). Thus the distributive principle chosen not only reflects the character of group relations but also helps to constitute those relations for the future.

So far I have been looking at factors affecting the desert/equality choice without specifying the precise basis of desert that is being used (I have spoken about "contribution," but that is helpfully ambiguous as between the size of the product someone creates and the part of the product that he or she is personally responsible for). There have, however, been some experimental studies which attempt to isolate which aspect or aspects of contribution are thought to deserve reward (Leventhal and Michaels 1971; Rest et al. 1973). Usually distinctions are made between ability (the talents or capacities someone brings to a performance), effort expended, and the performance itself (how much is actually produced or achieved). The upshot is that ability per se tends to be discounted as a basis for desert (unless the ability is seen as being a result of previous efforts, as in the case of voluntary training), whereas desert is assessed through some amalgam of performance and effort. That is, people judge that the appropriate reward depends on what each person achieves, but they qualify this to some degree when presented with data about effort—so that it is possible for a person who achieves less but tries harder to deserve more than another who tries less but achieves more. However, effort does not obliterate achievement: with effort held constant, the one who achieves more deserves more, so presumably the view is that ability can count toward desert when it is combined with effort but not when it stands alone.[11]

11. I say "presumably" because if achievements differ, while effort is held constant, the only explanations available are that performers differ in ability or else that external factors are affecting the outcome. Since I assume that no one would regard the latter as relevant to desert, it follows that ability is being allowed to count. The only other way of interpreting the results would be to argue that "achievement" is somehow picking up an additional aspect of "trying" besides that represented by "effort" (e.g., that over and above physical effort it depends on something like concentration). However, I can see no reason for adopting such a forced reading of the data.

One is tempted to ask here: which counts for more, effort or achievement, when practical desert judgments are made? I am not sure that this question can sensibly be answered, since it would first be necessary to establish comparable scales for measuring the two inputs before we could analyze their impact on judgments of desert. Moreover, even if there is some natural solution to the first problem, the answer may vary from case to case. Taking the two experimental studies referred to above, in the first (Leventhal and Michaels 1971) subjects had to assign deserved rewards on the basis of performance in a high jump. They were told about jump performance (high or low), effort (greater or less), bodily capacity (shorter or taller), and training, and could assign rewards on a scale from 0 to 100. Leaving training aside, this produced a scale running from about 95 (high jump, greater effort, shorter body height) to about 28 (low jump, less effort, taller body height) at the other extreme. Ratings of deservingness were affected most strongly by performance and effort, with effort slightly the more prominent—with the other factors held constant, shifting from less to greater effort increased the rating by about 35 points on average, while shifting from low to high jump performance increased the rating by about 27 points on average. However, the subjects were instructed in such a way as to suggest that the rewards were also to act as incentives, which perhaps explains the weight given to the factor that was directly subject to voluntary control. In the second experiment (Rest et al. 1973) subjects had to award stars to hypothetical schoolchildren given information about exam performance, immediate effort, usual level of effort, and ability. In this case exam performance had the biggest effect on the fair allocation of stars, with immediate effort second. Here the instructor's emphasis was on "conveying information back to the pupil" via the star system, and in this context it appears that the due recognition of achievement became the main priority. So, given some intuitive grasp as to how effort and achievement should be quantified relative to one another, it looks as though the answer to the question "which counts for most" is going to vary according to the context of distribution and perhaps also the nature of the stuff that is being distributed.

It is interesting to compare these empirical findings with the prevailing views of political theorists on the subject of desert. The consensus seems to be that people can only deserve things on the basis of features (such as effort) that are subject to voluntary control.[12] The alternative view, that any personal characteristic of the right kind can be a basis of desert, whether or not it is subject to the voluntary control of the agent, has minority support. Popular opinion seems to be pulled in

12. There are also, of course, a number of theorists (including John Rawls) who would reject desert entirely as a basic, preinstitutional criteron of justice.

two ways on this issue and to opt in practice for a compromise between the two views, with the exact position taken depending on the case in hand.

II

So far I have been looking at attitudes toward desert and equality in small groups. How far do things change when people are asked to make judgments of fairness about societywide distributions of resources? We find the same broad pattern of beliefs, with the principle of reward according to contribution dominant but offset to some degree by egalitarianism. For instance, when people are asked whether everyone ought to receive the same income, there is virtually unanimous rejection of this proposition (only about 5 percent of respondents—these are American samples—assent to it).[13] Now, there are several reasons people may have for rejecting equal incomes: they may believe that, as a matter of justice, people deserve unequal rewards; they may think that unequal incomes are needed to provide incentives for hard work; they may think that people have different tastes and preferences and therefore ought to have the freedom to earn the amounts of income needed to meet these varying desires; or they may simply believe that because of human cupidity equality would be impossible to maintain. In fact, it seems likely that these lines of reasoning will be run together in such a way that it will be difficult to say unequivocally that a particular person is appealing to justice as desert as opposed, say, to a claim about the necessity of having incentives. So we must treat the survey evidence with caution. But it is interesting that, at least at the level of verbal responses, all of these arguments are represented.[14]

In one survey, for instance, 78 percent of the general public agreed with the proposition that "Under a fair economic system, people with more ability would earn higher salaries" and 71 percent thought that it was fairer to pay people according to how hard they worked, as opposed to 6 percent thinking it was fairer to pay people according to their economic needs (McClosky and Zaller 1984, p. 84). In another survey, asked to choose between basing income on skills and training and basing it on family needs, 81 percent opted for the former and 13 percent for the latter, and 6 percent volunteered a compromise (Kluegel and Smith 1986, p. 112). These responses are naturally seen as invoking a range of slightly different notions of economic desert.

13. See McClosky and Zaller 1984, chap. 3; Kluegel and Smith 1986, chap. 5; I shall look at international comparisons later in the article, but it is worth stressing right away that the beliefs of American subjects are by no means atypical in this respect. For a comparison between the United States and the United Kingdom, see Bell and Robinson 1978; for a seven-nation study, see Smith 1989.

14. A good sample of the reasons offered spontaneously by American working men for rejecting material equality can be found in Lane 1962, chap. 4.

Equally, an "incentive" proposition—"Giving everybody about the same income regardless of the type of work they do would destroy the desire to work hard and do a better job"—won affirmative responses from 85 percent of the sample. The third and fourth kinds of consideration referred to above are represented by propositions such as "If incomes were more equal, life would be boring because people would all live in the same way" (61 percent agree, 39 percent disagree) and "Incomes cannot be made more equal because it's human nature to always want more than others" (82 percent agree, 18 percent disagree).[15] So we can say that when faced with a relatively simple choice between equal and unequal distribution of income in society, the great majority of people—70 percent or more—opt for the inegalitarian position, with only 5 percent or so opting for equality, and the remaining 20 percent or so declining to make such a simple choice. The reasons given appear to amalgamate desert, incentives, and beliefs about "human nature."

Another way of approaching this question has been to present people with a series of "vignettes" in which a hypothetical person is described—occupation, marital status, etc.—together with his or her income and then to ask the respondents how over- or underpaid they think that person is. By aggregating the answers it is possible to build up a picture of what, in the respondents' eyes, a fair distribution of income would look like (see Jasso and Rossi 1977; Alves and Rossi 1978; Alves 1982). Such studies reveal that a fair distribution would be substantially inegalitarian—in an American study conducted in 1974, the set of fair incomes for individuals ranged from $7,125 at the bottom to $18,447 at the top. (Yet this fair range of incomes is considerably narrower than the range of incomes that obtains in practice, and I shall come back to discuss the significance of that point shortly.) The grounds for discrimination were not all to do with desert: the vignette descriptions included factors such as sex, ethnicity, and number of dependents, and so it is reasonable to assume that respondents were judging what would be a fair income for a particular individual, all things considered. However, two desert-related factors—occupation and educational attainments—were included, and both were strongly correlated with differences in fair income, with occupation having the larger impact. Indeed, occupation was by some considerable margin the most significant factor affecting judgments of fair pay (Alves 1982, pp. 216–17).

Other studies have asked people simply to judge what pay differences between occupations are fair. A survey of leaders in American

15. Kluegel and Smith 1986, p. 107. Note that the propositions here refer to greater equality; one may surmise that analogous propositions about complete equality would attract still higher degrees of support.

political groups produced in the aggregate a scale of fair pay running from $7,954 at the bottom (for a lift operator) to $95,230 at the top (for a chief executive); most of the groups studied favored top-to-bottom income ratios of between 9 and 12 to 1 (Verba and Orren 1985, chap. 8). This still represented a considerable narrowing of existing differentials as perceived by the respondents, but clearly the overall pattern is substantially more inegalitarian than that thrown up by the vignette studies, where the top-to-bottom ratio is less than 3 to 1. What explains this? Partly, as I suggested above, that the vignette studies ask for a fair income for an individual, with specified needs as well as deserts, whereas the occupational studies ask simply what people in various occupations deserve to earn; partly that the top job in the former case is a professional job (a lawyer), whereas in the latter case it is a top executive;[16] and partly that the occupational studies ask people first about actual pay and then about fair pay, thus perhaps biasing their judgments toward the status quo,[17] whereas the vignette studies confront people with randomly assigned incomes and ask them to make judgments of under- or overpayment, thus perhaps biasing the final distribution toward the center point.[18]

Because of these difficulties, we cannot say definitively what range of earned incomes people would judge to be fair; indeed, it is very doubtful whether people themselves have a precise idea. We can say with some confidence that it would be substantially inegalitarian, but at the same time a good deal less inegalitarian than that which currently obtains in capitalist societies, even if we discount unearned incomes. Nor can we identify on the basis of the survey evidence the precise factors that lead people to say that one individual deserves to earn more than another. Here we need to turn to a different kind of evidence, such as that contained in Jennifer Hochschild's (1981) reports of intensive interviews with a small number of subjects.

We may begin with education as a possible basis for desert, in view of the fact that it appears in the vignette studies and that several of Hochschild's interviewees mention it as a reason why some people deserve more income than others. On closer inspection, however, it appears that education only serves as a desert basis at one remove, so to speak. If someone acquires an education, then she acquires skills which ought to find expression in more demanding and responsible

16. In the Verba and Orren study, a fair income for an executive was judged to be $95,320, but for a doctor, only $52,798. Removing executives from consideration almost halves the range of fair incomes.

17. There is clear evidence of this when international comparisons are made; I shall illustrate the point later in the article.

18. The reason for thinking this is that respondents tended to be "tolerant" in the sense that they were biased toward judging the randomly assigned incomes fair rather than too high or low.

work. Without that mediating factor, however, education does not entitle people to extra income. In the Kluegel and Smith (1986) study, respondents were asked whether if two people were doing the same type of work, the more highly educated of the two should be paid more. The majority of respondents (73 percent) thought not.

Of factors more directly related to work, we may single out occupation, effort, and results achieved. Hochschild's interviewees shift between these possibilities. Maria, a cleaner, "insists that hardworking janitors deserve more than lazy ones, but even lazy doctors deserve more than both" (Hochschild 1981, p. 112). Vincent, a factory worker, thinks that foremen should earn more than unskilled workers, but he also thinks that all workers on the same job should earn the same: "this one will do a little more than this one, and yet this one is still doing his best that he can do. You can't knock a guy for not putting out as much production as the next guy. Because not everyone is alike" (p. 115). Pamela, a secretary, in rapid succession "invokes compensation, skill, responsibility, effort, and training as justifications for a large reward. But if these criteria clash instead of concurring, productivity supersedes effort in her eyes" (p. 118). Such shifts appear to confirm the conclusion that we came to at the end of our survey of the small-group studies, namely, that people are torn between the view that we deserve reward for what in fact we achieve and the view that we deserve reward only for what is within our control, that is, our efforts and choices.

One further piece of evidence that deserves mention at this point is Soltan's (1987) study of job evaluation schemes. This can be looked at, with the reservations made on page 557 above, as a study of fairness in practice. Clearly, what such schemes provide are guidelines for remunerating different jobs fairly, not for remunerating particular individuals who may perform those jobs better or worse. So they will only pick up a subset of the factors that might be thought relevant to desert on a broader survey. With that limitation, we may note that the four classes of factor which are held to be relevant in evaluating a job are skill, responsibility, effort, and working conditions. They tend to be weighted in this order, with skill considerably ahead of the rest. (A few schemes put responsibility before skill, however.) Thus effort is somewhat overshadowed by other factors in this context. Soltan concludes that the underlying considerations are the importance of a job—the impact its performance has on the output of an institution—and its difficulty—the mental and physical requirements of performing the job adequately.

So far we have been exploring the nature and extent of popular commitment to desert criteria in judgments of social justice. But I said at the outset that there was also a tendency to equality even in judgments about the overall pattern of economic distribution. This tendency

manifests itself in two main ways. First, there is the view that the current spread of incomes is too great, and that a fair distribution would compress this range somewhat. Second, there is concern that people at the bottom end of the scale are not earning a "living wage," that is, one that is adequate to maintain a decent standard of living.

The first view appears to be not so much a challenge to the idea of desert as an opinion about the extent to which people do in reality differ in their deserts. We noted above that both the vignette studies and to a lesser extent the studies of occupational pay produce a narrower range of "fair" incomes than exists at present. Support for this conclusion can also be found in the attitude surveys. When an American sample were asked to choose not simply between equality and inequality in income but between "complete equality," "more equality than now," "the same as at present," and "more inequality," "more equality than now" came a fairly close second (38 percent) to the status quo (52 percent) (Kluegel and Smith 1986, p. 112). The rather broader proposition "Efforts to make everyone as equal as possible should be increased" attracted the support of 57 percent of respondents, as compared to the 10 percent who thought they should be decreased.[19] In a British study, the proposition "Differences in pay between the highly paid and the lowly paid are too great" was assented to by 76 percent of respondents.[20] At the same time, however, the idea of a politically determined ceiling on incomes attracts little support. This suggests that what is fueling moderate egalitarianism of the kind we are now considering is not the idea that no one could conceivably deserve, say, $250,000 but, rather, the belief that most of those who now earn very high salaries do not in fact deserve to be paid as much. Confirmation of this suggestion can be found by looking at the occupations whose pay was felt to be unfairly high or low. Groups generally thought to be unfairly overpaid included government officials, landlords, corporate executives, doctors, professional athletes, and movie stars. Groups thought to be unfairly underpaid included white-collar workers, non-unionized factory workers, teachers, and professors.[21] Together those beliefs point to a somewhat more compressed income distribution than that which currently obtains.

I have suggested that this very modest degree of egalitarianism may stem not from abandoning desert criteria but rather from applying them to a situation in which the economic market is seen to over- and

19. McClosky and Zaller 1984, p. 91. This proposition does not refer specifically to equality of income, and so it may be picking up commitments to equality of opportunity, e.g., alongside belief in the desirability of a narrower income range.

20. Mack and Lansley 1985, p. 223. For figures for other countries, see Smith 1989.

21. Kluegel and Smith 1986, p. 120. Very similar opinions can be found in Verba and Orren's (1985) study of group leaders.

underreward various occupational groups. There is, however, another strand to this argument which appears when people are asked about various possible benefits of equality. The only proposition of this kind in the Kluegel and Smith study to attract majority assent is that "more equality of incomes would lessen social conflict between people at different levels."[22] Here, then, we see reproduced at the macro-level the connection we discovered at the micro-level between group harmony or solidarity and equal distribution. But it is hardly surprising that this fails to become a major theme in discussions of income inequality (e.g., it only occasionally surfaces in Hochschild's interviews). Income is primarily earned in the economy, and the economy is predominantly a sphere of instrumental and/or competitive relationships. Thus, if we are to discover support for egalitarianism at the macro-level, we must mainly look for it in a different place.

Let me turn now to the question of low incomes. There is a common view that people at the bottom of the income scale are somehow being prevented from receiving what they deserve. For instance, the proposition "Most of the people who are poor and needy could contribute something valuable to society if given the chance" attracts overwhelming support (78 percent in favor, 7 percent against) (McClosky and Zaller 1984, p. 66). Alongside this we should put the finding from the vignette studies that the floor for perceived fair pay was considerably higher than the actual floor, that is, that occupations at the bottom of the income scale would be perceived as substantially underpaid if the facts were known.[23] Putting these two beliefs together, we can derive the conclusion that if everyone got what they deserved—that is, had a fair chance to enter the labor market, and then was paid a fair rate for the work that they did—everyone would be in a position to earn an income that was adequate to meet their routine needs.[24] (One practical manifestation of this is the widespread support for government-sponsored job creation schemes, which are far more popular than, e.g., guaranteed income schemes.)[25] Now, this attitude—which entails

22. Kluegel and Smith 1986, p. 106. The majority was, however, a fairly slim one—55 percent in favor, 45 percent against.

23. In the Verba and Orren (1985) study, only business leaders were against raising the pay of the worst-paid occupation: see p. 160.

24. This conclusion is well represented in the interview material presented in Rainwater 1974, esp. pp. 178–84.

25. The precise figures depend on how the question is put. There is somewhat greater support for the proposal that government should require firms to take on unemployed workers and then subsidize their wages than for the proposal that everyone who wants to work should be guaranteed a job, but both proposals get majority assent (see McClosky and Zaller 1984, p. 276; and Kluegel and Smith 1986, p. 153). On the other hand, the proposition that everyone who works should be guaranteed an income above the poverty line is considerably more popular than the proposition that everyone should have a guaranteed minimum income regardless, but neither attracts majority support (see Kluegel and Smith 1986, p. 153; and McClosky and Zaller 1984, p. 275).

that following desert principles would eliminate a major cause of poverty—does seem to coexist alongside another attitude which tends to blame the poor for their own predicament and which is influential in perceptions of welfare provision (I return to this issue below). So beliefs here are somewhat ambivalent (see esp. Rainwater 1974, pp. 179–82). But I think it is important to note, in concluding our discussion of desert and equality, that applying desert criteria to current income distributions would in most people's eyes not only mean compressing the range somewhat but also raising the floor quite sharply.

III

I turn now to consider the place of need considerations in popular beliefs about justice. Again, I shall begin with the evidence drawn from small-group contexts before moving on to examine beliefs about social justice on a wider scale. Far less research has been done by social psychologists on need-based principles of justice than on the desert-based principles we have already considered. As I noted above, when equality is presented as an alternative to some other distribution, it may well be unclear whether equality is being valued for its own sake or as a proxy for another principle. So if people are asked to choose between contribution and equality as modes of distributing money rewards, it would be possible to interpret a preference for equality as exhibiting a concern that people's needs should be satisfied equally. But this could only be a tentative hypothesis: only an experiment in which equality and distribution according to need were presented as alternatives would give us decisive proof. Rather few experiments have addressed this question.

When Deutsch (1975) originally introduced his tripartite classification of principles of justice—equity, equality, and need—he hypothesized that equality would be favored in relationships in which "the fostering or maintenance of enjoyable social relations is the common goal," whereas need would be favored where "the fostering of personal development and personal welfare is the common goal" (p. 143). However, it will be difficult in practice to separate these alternatives. Where people have warm relations with one another and feel a sense of solidarity with their group, it is likely that they will also feel committed to advancing one another's welfare. Thus the two goals will often go hand in hand.

To make some headway here we can observe first that need considerations only come into play when certain kinds of resources are being distributed: a group of people at a party sharing out paper hats are hardly going solemnly to assess needs. (This may capture part of Deutsch's point.) Second, and perhaps more significant, in order for need to be used as a criterion, people have to be prepared to reveal enough about themselves to allow relative needs to be assessed, and

others have to be confident that what has been revealed is reliable. This suggests that a fairly high degree of trust is usually going to be required before need criteria can be used effectively. As Mikula and Schwinger (1978) have pointed out, by revealing himself to be in need, a person runs the risk of lowering his standing in the eyes of the group and also of acquiring an open-ended obligation to reciprocate by helping other members of the group when they in turn are in need. The implication of the second point is that greater solidarity will usually be required to underpin the need principle than the equality principle. If competitive or instrumental relationships encourage the use of desert criteria of distribution and highly cooperative or solidaristic relationships provoke the use of need criteria, equality may be appropriate to groups which display enough solidarity to make their members forgo claims based on differential contribution but not so much that they are willing to go beyond mechanical equality to take account of individual circumstances.

There is limited evidence to support this last conjecture directly. In one experiment, subjects were asked to assign monetary rewards between two students who had contributed equally to a common task; one of the students was described as needing extra money to buy books for a course (Lamm and Schwinger 1980). A few subjects advocated equal distribution, but most favored giving the needy student the money he required before distributing the surplus.[26] This of course shows a general willingness to take need into account when distributive decisions are made. Of particular relevance to our conjecture, moreover, is that describing the students as like-minded and friendly, rather than as distant associates, increased respondents' willingness to shift from equality to need as the distributive criterion. Although they were being asked to apply a rule from outside, as it were, they were presumably choosing the rule that they thought appropriate to the situation of the people between whom they had to achieve justice.

Does it matter that the relevant difference was a difference in need as against simply a difference in preference or utility? Here it is possible to cite some research (Yaari and Bar-Hillel 1984) that demonstrates quite clearly that popular belief embodies such a distinction. Subjects were asked to distribute a consignment of a dozen grapefruit and a dozen avocados between two individuals, Smith and Jones. In one variant they were told that Smith and Jones were interested solely in deriving a certain vitamin from the two fruits but were able to convert grapefruit and avocado into the vitamin at different rates. Presented with a number of assignments representing different possible

26. Some divided the surplus equally between the two students, and others gave the whole of the surplus to the one who had not yet received any money; the latter option represents a kind of compromise between need and equality.

distributive criteria, respondents overwhelmingly selected the one which gave the respondents the highest equal amount of vitamin—as opposed, say, to an equal assignment of fruit or an assignment which maximized the overall amount of vitamin extracted.[27] In a second variant, the numerical values remained the same, but subjects were told that Smith and Jones got different amounts of utility from the fruit, as represented by the amounts of money they were each prepared to pay for a grapefruit and an avocado. The pattern of responses was radically different. The proportion favoring equality of outcome fell from 82 percent to 28 percent, and the most favored option was now that which maximized overall utility. One can sum up this finding as follows: where needs are at stake, people will aim at equality of need fulfillment, which means distributing in favor of those in greater need until they are brought up to the same level as others;[28] where tastes are at stake, they are much more inclined to favor individuals who can derive more utility from the item in question at the expense of equality of outcome.

In micro-contexts, we have seen, people are willing to allocate according to need when they have the opportunity to do so and they draw distinctions between needs and tastes or preferences, and there is some evidence to back the conjecture that the group context most favorable to this distributive principle is one characterized by a high level of mutual sympathy and trust. One issue left unresolved is whether distribution according to need is regarded as a matter of justice or as a matter of generosity or humanity. In the research I have been surveying, people are asked to express allocation preferences; they are not asked to characterize those preferences as based on fairness or on humanitarianism. Indeed, there is a tendency on the part of the researchers to conflate the two points of view (see, e.g., Schwartz 1975).

27. Yaari and Bar-Hillel refer to the highest equal amount of vitamin as the maximin solution, whereas I am taking it to represent the principle of distribution according to need. In a case such as the one described, where it is a question of dividing a fixed stock of goods between two individuals with the same basic needs, these two principles are bound to coincide. In defense of my interpretation, I would point out that if maximin were the fundamental principle at stake here, it would be difficult to explain why respondents shifted their ground so radically when needs were replaced by tastes. The rule "maximize the welfare of the worst-off individual" makes no distinction between differences in need and other kinds of utility difference.

28. It is interesting, however, that there is a limit to this. In one variant, Smith was described as being very poor at converting fruit into vitamin, so that to achieve equality of outcome almost all the fruit had to be given to him, and of course the level of vitamin achieved by both parties was low. Although equality of need fulfillment remained the most popular option, there were a large number of defections in favor of more efficient outcomes, giving Jones a higher proportion of fruit. This is the equivalent of the battlefield policy of "triage," where scarce medical resources are allocated to those they can help the most, at the expense of very seriously injured combatants who would require extensive treatment to have any chance of recovery.

In the case of distribution according to desert, the equivalent problem is far less acute, although I have noted that it is sometimes difficult to separate the desire to requite desert from the desire to provide incentives for future performance. Apart from this complication, it is reasonable to assume that someone who maintains that people who make larger contributions should receive bigger rewards is expressing a belief about distributive justice. In the case of the need criterion, matters are not so simple. In the literature of political philosophy, some have argued that the claims of need are claims of humanity or benevolence rather than of justice; others have taken the opposite view.[29] The research considered so far does not allow us to say which view is closer to popular opinion.

One test of the distinction between justice and humanity is whether those in need are regarded as having enforceable claims to the resources that will meet their needs, and correspondingly, whether potential donors are regarded as being under enforceable obligations to provide those resources. Let us keep this test in mind as we approach the evidence about macro-beliefs in this area. Must a society provide for its needy members in order to count as just? Provisional answers to this question can be found by looking at attitudes toward public welfare provision. A very large proportion of the population supports such provision at least in the case of certain needs. For instance, American respondents (who one would expect to be the least favorable to welfare measures) supported by large majorities government provision of pensions, health care, and relief for those unable to support themselves (McClosky and Zaller 1984, p. 272). Similar attitudes are displayed by British respondents (see Taylor-Gooby 1987). However, two caveats must immediately be added. First, support for state provision is consistent with believing that people should be able to make private provision for pensions, health care, education, etc. (Taylor-Gooby 1985, chap. 2), so what we have here is not necessarily the view that certain goods and services must be distributed on the basis of need but, rather, the view that society has a responsibility to meet needs up to a certain level, while there is nothing wrong in some people choosing to buy superior provision. Second, people tend to be strongly concerned that the needy should not be responsible for being in need, either in the sense that they have brought their needs upon themselves or in the sense that they could escape them with a little effort. This concern lies behind skepticism about welfare payments, where there is a widespread view that too much money is going to people who are needy only because of their own laziness or fecklessness.[30] Thus, as a number

29. See, e.g., Campbell 1974 and my own counterargument in Miller 1980.

30. See Jaffe 1978 and Kluegel and Smith 1986, p. 152–58, for American evidence; and Mack and Lansley 1985, pp. 209–21, for British evidence.

of authors have observed, the nineteenth-century distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor is still alive and well. Putting the point more formally, we see desert criteria taking a certain precedence over need criteria, not in the sense that the distributive claims of desert must necessarily take precedence over those of need, but in the sense that people must show themselves to be sufficiently deserving before their needs are allowed to count from the point of view of justice.[31]

Is there agreement about what should count as a need? Old age, disability, and sickness provide uncontroversial cases, but can this be extended to other items which are less tied to physiological criteria? Mack and Lansley (1985), in their study of poverty in Britain, approached this question by asking people to divide a list of items into those which were "necessary" and which adults "should not have to do without" and those which were "desirable but not necessary" (chap. 3). The results showed that the distinction was not hard-and-fast. At one end there was overwhelming consensus that things such as a heated house, a bath, and a bed were necessities; at the other end; there was a general view that a car and a night out once a fortnight were not. In between, opinion was evenly divided on the question whether a television set was a necessity or a luxury. For the most part these responses were independent of the subject's own standard of living and possession/nonpossession of the particular item in question. So even if we do not find a hard-and-fast definition of 'need', there is at least a consensus about a spectrum that runs from indisputable needs, through borderline needs, to indisputable desires.[32]

So, to sum up so far, people believe (with some important qualifications) that a society's public arrangements should ensure that needs are met, and there is reasonable agreement about what can count as a need. Can we say with confidence that the meeting of needs is a matter of social justice? I do not think so. Two pieces of evidence suggest the contrary view, although they, too, are far from decisive. One is the response offered to the statement, "The system of taxes and benefits that many people call the welfare state makes for a just society," with which 38 percent agreed, 41 percent disagreed, and 21 percent gave a neutral response (Taylor-Gooby 1985, p. 35). This apparent reluctance on the part of many respondents to acknowledge a link between the welfare state and social justice suggests that support for welfare may have other sources—perhaps altruism toward the poor or long-term self-interest. However, the evidence is not conclusive,

31. I return to this question of priority shortly.

32. The spectrum shifts with time, as certain items previously considered luxuries come to be counted as necessities. This process reveals itself too in changing perceptions of the minimum income needed to avoid poverty. See Rainwater 1974, chap. 3.

since the negative responses could be fueled by skepticism about the way that the welfare state performs in practice rather than by principled doubts. (In the same survey, 58 percent of respondents disputed the claim that the welfare state "meets people's needs satisfactorily" and 70 percent affirmed that it "helps people who don't need help.")[33] Perhaps more revealing is the attitude displayed when people are asked whether they are prepared to carry the tax burden of helping the needy. Here the generally favorable attitudes toward welfare provision we have already noted are counterbalanced by a reluctance to bear any significant increase in taxation. For instance, Mack and Lansley (1985) found widespread support for the general proposition that it is important to increase government spending to get rid of poverty. They then went on to ask a more revealing question, namely, how big an increase in the standard rate of income tax respondents would be willing to accept if this would enable everyone to afford the items they themselves had listed as necessities. Seventy-four percent said they would accept a rise of 1 penny in the pound, with 20 percent against. However, when asked about a rise of 5 pence in the pound, there was a sharp reversal of opinion, with only 34 percent in favor and 53 percent against (p. 258). This very marked sensitivity to the cost of welfare provision is precisely what one would expect if popular opinion were grounded in altruism rather than social justice. People are trading off concern for the deprived against personal consumption and are showing some reluctance to cut back significantly on their own consumption to provide for others' needs. If, on the other hand, welfare were thought of as a demand of justice, then people should be willing to support tax increases up to whatever level proved to be necessary to provide it, subject only to constraints of feasibility.

But even this evidence is ambiguous. Perhaps people would be prepared to be taxed at a higher level if they thought that the proceeds would go entirely to the genuinely needy.[34] It is impossible with the evidence available to separate doubts about the justice of distribution according to need from doubts about how the welfare state tends in practice to operate. At a more theoretical level, we can say the following: when examining the small-group research, we saw that people could be induced to switch from desert to need criteria of distribution by manipulating the character of group relations so that a sense of cooperation and solidarity prevailed. It seems highly unlikely that relationships across a whole society could ever display such a unitary character. Instead we are likely to find elements of solidarity juxtaposed

33. See also here Lane's (1986) more general argument that people are more favorably disposed to "market justice" than to "political justice" because they see just outcomes as occurring spontaneously in a market context, whereas they see political outcomes as emerging from the clash of special interests.

34. See, e.g., the views of "Anne" recorded in Hochschild 1981, pp. 174–75.

with elements of competition, and so forth. Under these circumstances we will not find a sense of social cooperation that is sufficiently strong to obliterate competitive and instrumental relationships; at best, it can offset those relationships to some degree. Thus the claims of need will always be vulnerable to challenge by the claims of desert once we move outside a small-group context (we have already seen, in the case of welfare provision, how this challenge may make itself felt in practice). One way of avoiding the ensuing conflict of principles is to downgrade the claims of need so that they are no longer seen as claims of justice. This, I believe, may explain the ambivalence we have unearthed in popular opinion. The needy have a fair claim to be helped, and I can help them. But wait, I also have a fair claim to the resources I have earned in the marketplace. So perhaps the needy can only call on my generosity.[35]

IV

Up to now we have been looking at how people interpret criteria of desert and need and at what inclines them to use one or the other criterion when judging the fairness of a distribution. We shall now look briefly at how judgments are made when both criteria are salient, perhaps because information has been supplied about both the deserts and the needs of potential recipients. It appears that in such circumstances people aggregate the two kinds of factor and give composite judgments of fairness. In the light of the evidence so far, we should expect the weighting of desert and need considerations to vary according to the background relationships within which the distribution has to be made. It is of some interest, however, that neither factor is afforded strict priority. It may help to show that popular belief does indeed regard need differences as relevant to distributive justice.[36]

There is a small amount of evidence on this question both in the findings of small-group research and in the attitude surveys of beliefs about social justice. In one micro-study (Elliot and Meaker 1986), subjects were asked to imagine that they were supervising a group of five research workers, and they had to assign a reward to one worker who was variously described either as having made a much higher or a much lower contribution to the group's task than the other workers or as being in much greater or less financial need. Not all subjects responded to these differences, but those who did balanced up the two sets of factors in what the researchers describe as "a simple additive

35. There are many examples of reasoning along these lines in Hochschild 1981, esp. chaps. 6 and 8.

36. I put this point fairly cautiously, since it would be possible to give a different interpretation: people may think of distribution according to need as required by humanitarian considerations rather than justice, but then be willing to trade off justice and humanity rather than give strict priority to justice.

fashion" (i.e., a high-contribution, high-need worker would be given a financial reward that aggregated the separate effects of the two considerations). Thus, it is not the case that where people are seen as differing in their deserts, say, this fact obliterates differences in need but, rather, that respondents are making an all-things-considered judgment about fair remuneration.

A very similar finding emerges from the vignette studies where people are given a portrait of a hypothetical individual and asked to say whether he or she is under- or overpaid. These judgments turn out to be sensitive not only to desert-related factors—education and occupation—but also to need-related factors—marital status and number of dependent children. Again, these factors are aggregated and an on-balance judgment made so that if, say, A is described as having a high-ranking job and also several children, his perceived fair level of income will rise by two independent amounts. Now, the phrasing of the questions in these studies ('Is the salary about right for this person?', etc.) was not such as to focus attention on the issue of justice as against some looser idea of appropriate income. Yet it is noteworthy that both here and in the micro-study reported above, people were being asked to make judgments in a work-income context, where the normal convention is that deserts alone are considered, while differences in need are catered to by other institutions such as social service departments (salaries in the labor market do not, e.g., take account of the number of dependents that the employee has). Despite this contextual bias, respondents asked to make specific judgments of fair income gave significant weight to need in arriving at their judgments—albeit less weight than to desert-related factors, especially occupation. (It is interesting to juxtapose this finding with the research reported on p. 564 above in which people were asked to say in the abstract whether desert or need criteria should be used as a basis for distributing income; as we saw, most people favor desert when presented with such an either/or choice.)

So far, the evidence we have uncovered points toward pluralism in popular judgments of justice, with people trading off desert and need considerations against one another, trading off different aspects of desert (effort and achievement), and so forth.[37] Let us then consider how the leading example of an antipluralist theory of justice, that of John Rawls, fares when tested against popular opinion, and in particular how people respond to Rawls's difference principle, which holds that social and economic inequalities are fair insofar as they act to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society.[38] This is

37. Also, trading off strict justice against efficiency, as suggested in n. 28 above.

38. Rawls's theory is antipluralist because, although when fully spelled out, it contains three separate principles—equal liberty, equality of opportunity, and the dif-

equivalent to the injunction to maximize the level of primary goods (income, etc.) enjoyed by those who hold the smallest share of such goods.[39]

As is well known, Rawls argues that people will select the difference principle from behind a "veil of ignorance" which deprives them of knowledge of how they in particular will fare under alternative distributive schemes. Early evidence suggested that placing people behind such a veil increased their readiness to support redistribution from more advantaged to less advantaged people (see Brickman 1977). More recently, Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Eavey (1987a, 1987b) have asked subjects ignorant of their own likely place in the reward schedule to choose between four alternative principles for distributing income: maximizing the minimum income, maximizing the average, maximizing the average subject to a floor constraint (no income to fall below x dollars), and maximizing the average subject to a range constraint (the gap between top and bottom incomes not to exceed y dollars). These principles were illustrated by different schedules for distributing annual income, and the participants were then set to work on a specific task whose remuneration was fixed according to one or the other schedule. Thus, the judgment they were called on to make combined the narrower question "which scheme would you prefer to work under?" with the broader question "which scheme is fairest for society as a whole?"

Besides asking for individual rankings of the four distributive principles, the experimenters placed subjects in groups of five and asked them to reach agreement on a preferred principle (in order to simulate Rawls's notion of agreement in the original position). This produced the quite striking finding that although the difference principle (maximizing the minimum income) was the first choice of a very small minority of individuals (about 4 percent of the total sample), it was never selected as a group choice. Instead, the overwhelmingly popular choice was to maximize the average income subject to a floor constraint. This was the individual first choice of two-thirds of the participants and was selected by over three-quarters of the groups. The second choice, but trailing far behind, was to maximize the average social income without restriction.

The authors of these studies present their findings as confirmation of pluralism in beliefs about justice. Subjects were concerned, on the one hand, that no one should have to live in poverty; on the other

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ference principle—it also establishes a strict order of priority between these principles. In any case, I focus here on the difference principle.

39. This is not the place to consider the various slightly different interpretations that can be given of the difference principle, since they do not bear on the main conclusion reported below.

hand, they wanted to ensure that the able and hardworking had the chance to reap large rewards. These two concerns were best met by imposing an income floor and then maximizing the average salary that individuals could receive above it. The difference principle was rejected because it emphasized the first concern to the entire exclusion of the second. Moreover, "groups spent *considerable* time discussing the trade-offs between setting higher constraints on the floor (and thus lowering their total income) and setting lower constraints on the floor (and thus hurting those in the lower class). Most individuals wanted to balance the security of a higher floor with the possibility of increasing the average income in the hope that they might fall into one of the higher income classes" (Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Eavey 1987a, p. 630).

In a further variation of the experiment, Frohlich and Oppenheimer (1990) checked to see whether people's attachment to their principles was stable in the sense that they would continue to affirm them after experiencing their effects in practice (this picks up Rawls's concern about what he calls "the strains of commitment"). In this study, subjects performed their task and income was redistributed through a tax and benefit system according to the principle that had been selected. The outcome was that subjects' commitment to their principles remained undiminished; in particular, belief in the desirability of an income floor was not weakened by having to pay a "tax" to maintain it for those who earned less.

It is somewhat moot how damaging these findings are to Rawls's attempt to justify the difference principle as a principle of justice. Broadly speaking, there are two strategies that a Rawlsian might pursue given this evidence. One is to challenge the use of laboratory simulations to represent the original position. The chief argument here is that the experiments do not place people in a real situation of risk, since the amounts they stand to gain or lose by adopting the various reward schedules are relatively trivial, whereas it is integral to Rawls's argument for the difference principle that it will be used to determine people's overall life chances.[40] However, if one followed this argument it would

40. More radically still, it might be claimed that Rawls is specifying what it would be rational to choose under certain circumstances, and so his argument cannot be defeated by observations about what people do in fact choose in these circumstances. However, we may note that Rawls wisely eschews any attempt to show that maximin is in general the rational strategy for choosing under uncertainty (*A Theory of Justice*, sec. 26). Instead, he appeals to certain empirical features of the original position as he has identified it, which, he claims, make it reasonable to adopt such a conservative strategy. This seems to me to involve an empirical claim about how human beings will in general respond to uncertainties of the kind described and so is open to empirical confirmation or falsification. (I am grateful to Andrew Williams for bringing this possibility to my attention.)

be difficult to explain the strong preference for having a floor constraint as opposed simply to maximizing the average income, or indeed to explain the exchanges that took place in group discussion, where participants were expressing their concern for the life chances of different groups in society. It appears that the experiments did in fact succeed in inducing the relatively conservative disposition that Rawls thinks appropriate to the making of choices of this sort but that this expressed itself in support for an income floor rather than for the difference principle. The virtually unanimous rejection of the latter principle is arresting, and may perhaps confirm the view that such prima facie plausibility as it may have arises from a failure to distinguish between setting an income floor and maximizing the minimum level of income regardless of where that minimum falls. By presenting these as clear alternatives, Frohlich and his collaborators demonstrate that people's concern is to avoid the chance of themselves or others experiencing serious deprivation, not to improve the position of the worst-off without qualification.

The other strategy open to a Rawlsian is to offer a defense of the difference principle that does not rely on the claim that it would be chosen by people ignorant of their personal characteristics and their place in society. There is evidence that Rawls himself, in writings subsequent to *A Theory of Justice,* has come to think that the argument from the original position can be used to defend the two principles of justice in a straightforward contest with utilitarianism but is not decisive when the two principles are compared with "mixed conceptions"—for example, average utilitarianism constrained by the principle of equal liberty (see esp. Rawls 1974, 1987, preface). To defend the difference principle in such a comparison, he might rely either on a straightforward appeal to publicity—which principle of justice when publicly acknowledged is most likely to be able to underpin a stable system of social cooperation?—or else mount a more circuitous argument via the principle of equal opportunity.[41] Clearly, the experiments of Frohlich, Oppenheimer, and Eavey become less relevant if such a strategy is adopted. As noted above, however, later studies by these researchers have shown that the distributive scheme which maximizes average income subject to a floor constraint remains stable when people experience its results in a small-group setting. More generally, the evidence surveyed throughout this article highlights popular attachment to desert as a major criterion for income distribution and suggests that a distribution based on this criterion is potentially more stable than one that aims to raise the position of the worst-off group regardless of considerations of desert and need.

41. See Barry 1989, chap. 6, for the latter approach.

V

I turn in the final part of the paper to look at how (if at all) conceptions of justice vary according to the sex, class, and nationality of the person concerned. Many detailed issues arise here which must be left aside in an attempt to give the broad picture. My focus will be on the question whether some categories of people are more egalitarian in outlook than others, which, using the conceptual framework employed up to now, can be broken down into two subquestions: Are some groups more likely than others to resist differential treatment on grounds of desert? And are some groups more likely than others to favor differential treatment on grounds of need?

In an examination of comparisons between men's and women's views of justice, we ought perhaps to begin with Carol Gilligan's (1982) provocative claim that the notion of justice itself is sexually biased since it is affiliated with an "ethic of rights" which she finds characteristic of male moral reasoning as contrasted with an "ethic of care" which predominates among women. However, there are two major difficulties with Gilligan's argument. First, it is not clear whether the ethical contrast she draws involves a contrast between justice and something else or between two conceptions of justice, one abstract in character and centered on notions of personal rights (to life, liberty, etc.) and the other focusing on concrete relationships and centered on notions of harm avoidance and need (see Mason 1990). Second, the evidential basis for Gilligan's claims is very weak. She presents extracts from taped interviews which she then presents as revealing one or the other ethic, but to my eye there is a considerable degree of interpretive latitude. There are no quantitative checks on the data. Critics have shown that conclusions quite different from Gilligan's could easily be reached by interpreting her data in another (but equally selective) way (see Broughton 1983; Nails 1983).

The consensus among those who have examined men's and women's views of justice experimentally is that differences in abstract conceptions of justice are not substantial, but there are some differences in "justice behavior," that is, in what men and women will choose to do in some concrete situation.[42] In experiments where subjects could choose between the contribution rule and the equality rule to allocate resources, women who had to allocate from outside the group expressed the same preferences as men, generally favoring the desert-based criterion of contribution. However, in an experiment where the subjects thought they might have to discuss their decision with the recipients, women were more likely than men to compromise between the two rules

42. See Major and Deaux 1982 for a very helpful review of the literature on this topic.

(Austin and McGinn 1977). Moreover, women who perform at a high level in a group context and then have to allocate between themselves and the rest of the group are more likely than men to favor equality rather than insisting on their deserts. Major and Deaux (1982) sum this up nicely: "Sex differences in reward distribution occur primarily when the allocator is also a recipient of his or her allocations. That is, men and women typically allocate rewards similarly to others but differently to themselves. In general, women allocate less reward to themselves than do men. These effects are particularly noticeable when women's inputs are greater than their partner's. In this situation, women appear to follow a norm of equality, whereas men follow a norm of equity" (p. 51).

Studies of attitudes to social distribution generally confirm that men and women make similar judgments at the abstract level. Kluegel and Smith (1986) found a significant difference only in one of the four questions they asked about social inequality, where women were more likely than men to prefer greater equality to the current distribution of income.[43] Convergence appears also in the vignette studies, where the weightings attributable to occupation, education, and need (measured by number of children) in determining what counts as fair pay vary little between male and female respondents (Alves 1982, pp. 218–19). So it seems that we can largely discount sex as a source of difference in general notions of distributive justice, even though it may matter in determining behavior in concrete situations.

Let us now move on to consider class differences in conceptions of justice. I shall not consider in any detail the difficult issue of how class is best understood for this purpose. It may be defined in terms of income, in terms of occupation, or in terms of social prestige. The evidence I shall survey variously makes use of each of these criteria, making it difficult to compare the results produced by different investigators. As indicated above, the question I shall be pursuing is whether the working class is significantly more egalitarian in its beliefs about justice than the middle class.

The first point to make here is that working-class subjects generally endorse rather than reject the dominant belief in the fairness of income differentials based on skill, effort, and achievement. This comes out particularly vividly in the interview studies conducted some years ago by Lane (1962) and more recently by Hochschild (1981). Each member of Lane's sample of working-class men rejected the proposition that incomes should be equal (see chap. 4). Hochschild found varying

43. See chap. 5. It is quite possible, moreover, that this question has picked up a specifically feminist concern about the unfairness of the current distribution of income as between men and women, so that "greater equality" means, for the respondent, "greater equality between the sexes." I shall not pursue the issue of sexual justice in this article, leaving it open that men's and women's beliefs in this area might differ significantly even though their beliefs about other aspects of social justice converge.

degrees of enthusiasm for distribution by desert among her respondents, but even the most egalitarian of them wanted only to compress the income scale, not to abolish distinctions between the skilled and the unskilled, the lazy and the hardworking altogether (see chap. 7).

This is not to say, however, that class is irrelevant to beliefs about desert and justice. Most studies (though not all) find some correlation between a low rank on one of the class measures and egalitarianism. The relationship appears easiest to establish when class is defined in terms of income. In one study, for instance, 9 percent of those whose family income was less than $6,000 believed that under a fair economic system everyone would earn about the same, as compared with only 2 percent of those whose family income was over $35,000; conversely, 76 percent of the former group, as compared with 84 percent of the latter, believed that people with more ability should earn higher salaries (McClosky and Zaller 1984, p. 156). Kluegel and Smith (1986) likewise find weak correlations between income level and preference for the current distribution of income as opposed to greater equality, the belief that incomes should depend on skill and training rather than need, and inegalitarianism generally (chap. 5). These findings come from American samples. A seven-country comparative study by Smith (1989) shows that class differences in attitudes to inequality are generally smaller in the United States than in any of the other countries surveyed (of the countries surveyed, the Netherlands reveals the highest degree of class polarization in this area). However, nowhere is the relationship between class and egalitarianism particularly strong. Smith's conclusion is that "class is consistently related to attitudes towards social welfare and inequality, but that the relationship is generally modest" (p. 73).

Smith's data are broken down by income, occupation, and level of education, and this allows us to say something about which factor is most significant in explaining differences of belief about social justice. On the general inequality question ("Are differences in income too large?") level of income tends to count for more than occupation or educational level. An exception here is the United Kingdom, where occupation is the most significant factor. The United States exemplifies the converse of this: the effect of occupation on beliefs about inequality is very weak indeed. There is an even more striking finding in the study by Robinson and Bell (1978) where, using a composite measure of egalitarianism, they found a small inverse correlation between occupation and egalitarianism in their U.S. sample (i.e., people in low-grade occupations were slightly more likely to display inegalitarian attitudes), whereas for British subjects occupation remained the most significant determinant of egalitarianism (in the usual direction).[44]

44. Too much weight should not be attached to this finding. The sample was a small one; moreover, I speculate that the inverse correlation in the American sample may be explained by the inclusion of an item concerning racial discrimination in the equality index.

Turning now to the question of need, the most relevant data are those tracing class differences in attitudes to welfare provision. The data reported by Smith include questions on attitudes toward guaranteed jobs, support for the unemployed, and guaranteed minimum incomes, and here class differences are quite similar to those noted above in the case of attitudes toward inequality. A British study using a social welfare index which aggregated attitudes to spending on social services, welfare benefits, poverty, and the National Health Service and to the redistribution of wealth found overall a small but significant relationship between pro-welfare attitudes and low occupational status (Whiteley 1981). However, when a tripartite distinction between managers, nonmanual workers, and manual workers was drawn, it turned out that the intermediate group had attitudes similar to those of the managers, and in some cases—for instance, in their attitude to increased spending on social services—were a little more opposed to welfare provision. It is interesting that beliefs about expenditure on the National Health Service showed no significant class differences. This corresponds broadly to the findings of a second British study, which asked respondents specifically about their willingness to be taxed to finance a range of welfare services (Beedle and Taylor-Gooby 1983). In a few cases—for instance, pensions—the manual/nonmanual divide was significantly correlated with pro-welfare beliefs, but in the case of the overall index the relationship was very weak: 52 percent of manuals and 48 percent of nonmanuals were classified as generally supporting more expenditure on welfare. The relationship with income level was weaker still.

Finally, here we may refer to the vignette studies which provide information on how respondents balance desert- and need-related factors against each other when asked to make overall judgments of fair pay. The desert-related factors were education and occupation, the need related factors, marital status and family size. Here it is interesting to note that lower-class respondents particularly play down educational level (and to a lesser extent occupation) as a determinant of fair income; on the other hand, they give greater weight than higher-class respondents to number of dependents. These differences are significant whether class is measured by income or by occupational prestige (see Alves and Rossi 1978, pp. 557–62).

To sum up this brief discussion of class and justice, the picture is one of a considerable degree of cross-class consensus on what constitutes a socially just distribution of benefits. Where differences exist, they reveal working-class people to be somewhat less committed to the view that the able and talented deserve high rewards and somewhat more committed to the view that it is society's duty to meet a range of needs and provide everyone with a minimum standard of life.[45] We

45. It may also be of some interest to note that weak class differences have been found in the extent to which desert criteria are used to make judgments about fair

may ask what explains such differences in emphasis as we have found. There are broadly two avenues of inquiry we might pursue. One appeals to the idea that beliefs about justice are a rationalization of self-interest: people will tend to endorse the view of justice which, if implemented, would work to their relative advantage. At the individual level, it has often been observed that people tend to regard as fair pay for the job they are doing a small percentage increment on their current income. Transposing this to the social level, we would expect to find people at the low end of the income scale favoring its compression and those near to the top in favor of stretching it out, and this would give a familiar and straightforward explanation for the differences in belief we have unearthed. An alternative approach is to relate differences in belief to differences in social context. Here it could be argued that lower-class respondents tend to have greater exposure to solidaristic relationships (through trade unions, etc.) and less exposure to competitive relationships than higher-class respondents.[46] This would link the sociological findings just discussed to our earlier analysis of the way in which the character of a group within which a distribution has to be made affects the criterion of fair distribution that is employed. The linking assumption is that a person's immediate social experience colors his or her general view of society so that, for instance, someone who experiences a high level of solidarity in his or her everyday relationships will be inclined also to conceive society in solidaristic terms and therefore to use the appropriate criteria (in this case, criteria of need) in making judgments of social justice.

I will not attempt to adjudicate between these two approaches: my guess is that each of them contains a part of the truth. A final point worth noting is that all the studies I have consulted concur in the following respect: there is considerably less class disagreement about distributive justice in the abstract than about the extent to which existing societies are socially just. In relation to the latter question, it is noteworthy that, for instance, lower- and higher-class respondents have significantly different perceptions of the extent to which people have equal opportunities to get highly paid jobs; correspondingly, they tend to give different explanations of why people succeed or fail financially, the poor emphasizing structural factors, the rich, personal qualities such as effort and ambition (see Rytina, Form, and Pease 1970; Kluegel and Smith 1986, chaps. 3–4). Again, when people are asked about who contributes to and who benefits from the welfare state, perceptions diverge in a similar way, with the higher-income

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punishments (see Hamilton and Rytina 1980). To that extent, we can regard desert as a characteristically "bourgeois" notion. But it is important to emphasize that these differences are very minor as compared to the degree of cross-class consensus that can be observed.

46. I have explored this line of argument a bit further in Miller 1976, chap. 8.

groups believing that they shoulder most of the tax burden, and so on (Beedle and Taylor-Gooby 1983). Thus, insofar as we can speak of class ideology affecting beliefs about social justice, this is most likely to arise not at the level of abstract principle but at the point at which principles have to be applied to particular societies to arrive at concrete judgments about how fair they are.

We come finally to international comparisons. There is as yet no systematic cross-national study of beliefs about distributive justice, but there are a small number of somewhat ad hoc comparative studies at both micro- and macro-levels.[47] Since the United States is frequently used as one-half of the comparison, it is most convenient to use that country as our bench mark and to investigate how far beliefs about distributive justice differ in other countries from those in the United States.

What we find is that differences here may be quite considerable in the case of societies whose social structure and culture are radically at variance with that of the United States. In the case of the advanced capitalist democracies, the contrasts are less marked, but there is still a general tendency for the United States to occupy a polar position on issues such as general attitudes to equality and inequality. For instance, when people in a seven-nation study were asked whether income differences in their society were too large, the percentages agreeing or agreeing strongly were as follows: Italy, 86 percent; Britain 75 percent; Hungary, 74 percent; West Germany, 72 percent; the Netherlands, 66 percent; Australia, 58 percent; United States, 56 percent (Smith 1989, p. 66). However, the picture is not entirely clear-cut. In a comparison between the United States and the United Kingdom, there was a very similar pattern of response to the propositions "It would be fairer if people were paid by how much they need to live decently than by the jobs they do" and "It would be a good thing if the government decided to distribute all the money equally among all the population"—indeed, the second proposition revealed a higher proportion of strong egalitarians in the United States than the United Kingdom (Bell and Robinson 1978, p. 247). These statements both seem to tap skepticism about desert as a basis for distribution and show roughly the same 80-20 split (for desert and against equality) in both countries. As one might expect (given underlying cultural similarities), the United Kingdom and the United States are close in their citizens' general beliefs about justice and somewhat less close over the more practical question of the government's responsibility to promote

47. The seven-nation study reported in Smith 1989 is the most ambitious to date, but it deals only with a few aspects of popular conceptions of social justice. At the time of writing, a more detailed study comparing beliefs about justice in twelve countries is at the data collection stage.

social justice, where the American tradition of antigovernmentalism makes itself felt, particularly on the issue of welfare provision.

A sharper difference emerges from a three-sided comparison between the United States, Germany, and Sweden, using experiments where subjects were asked to rank order the contribution, need, and equality rules as means of allocating a range of resources.[48] It emerges that whereas American businessmen favored the contribution rule for most resources and American students favored it for money and status, Swedish students were consistently egalitarian in their preferences and consistently opposed to the contribution rule. The German students adopted an intermediate posture, favoring the latter rule for status but not for money. This pattern of responses corresponds to the differences in political culture that one would normally attribute to these three societies, with the United States displaying the highest degree of individualism, Sweden the highest degree of social solidarity, and Germany occupying an intermediate position representing a blend of capitalist and social democratic ideology.

Cross-national studies also reveal the extent to which concrete judgments of fairness reflect existing patterns of social distribution. A study of group leaders in the United States, Japan, and Sweden asked about occupational pay differences and found that the inequalities that people regarded as fair were strongly correlated with prevailing inequalities of income. Thus, whereas American respondents perceived a top-to-bottom income differential (between a top executive and a lift operator) of 29 to 1 and regarded a differential of 15 to 1 as fair, Swedish respondents estimated the existing differential (in this case between a top executive and a dishwasher) to be only 3.4 to 1 and wished to reduce this marginally to 3.1 to 1. Japanese respondents took an intermediate view (Verba et al. 1987, chap. 6). The study reveals a good deal of cross-national consensus on where occupations stand in relation to one another: doctors are uniformly judged to be more deserving than policemen, professors than bank tellers, and so forth. The divergences arise when these differences in desert have to be quantified to yield a scale of fair incomes: here, it seems, people are heavily influenced by existing pay scales.[49]

Very few comparisons have yet been attempted between ideas of justice in developed and developing countries. In one study American and Indian respondents were asked to judge how a company should allocate a $200 bonus between two employees in light of information

48. Törnblom and Foa 1983. The resources considered were love, status, information, money, goods, and services.

49. As I suggested earlier (p. 566), this influence may have been enhanced still further by the way in which the questions were asked, with the question about existing pay alongside the question about fair pay.

about each person's work performance and domestic needs (Murphy-Berman et al. 1984). The Americans were inclined to favor either equality or contribution as the basis for distribution; the Indians, on the other hand, overwhelmingly favored distribution according to need. In a second study, Mexican peasants and blue- and white-collar workers were compared with American blue- and white-collar workers (Tallman and Ihinger-Tallman 1979). Three questions were asked, designed to elicit preferences either for the proportionality or the equality principle in allocating resources. Two of the questions were, in my view, not particularly apt, but the third asked respondents to say whether a job should be assigned on the basis of the applicants' work experience or their financial need. Although a majority in all samples favored work experience, the majority was considerably larger among American respondents (class differences worked in the usual direction, and at the extreme—Mexican blue-collar workers—preferences for the two principles were almost equally balanced). These studies suggest that if we were systematically to compare societies with well-developed capitalist economies with those in which market relationships have not yet come to occupy such a central position, we would find quite significant differences in conceptions of social justice. In particular, the preeminence of desert criteria, which was a major theme running through our analysis of studies undertaken in Western societies, may be radically weakened if we look elsewhere.

VI

In looking at how people's conceptions of distributive justice vary, we have also begun to ask why they vary, and this brings us back to a question raised at the beginning of this article: What precisely is the relevance of the empirical research surveyed here to normative theories of justice? I assume that one test of an acceptable normative theory is that it should be possible to make a reasonable case for the theory to those to whom it is to apply. In other words, although it would be asking too much to require that there should be a spontaneous fit between the claims of the theory and the beliefs that people currently hold, it is important that where there are divergences it should be possible to give people grounds for altering their beliefs in line with the theory. This in turn requires that the existing points of convergence are more fundamental than the points of divergence. Now, here variations in belief become important, for if it turns out that different people's beliefs themselves diverge in fundamental respects, then the very idea of constructing a theory of justice is put in question: perhaps all that we can do is to construct different theories for different audiences and then offer a sociological explanation of some sort as to why beliefs diverge so radically.

We have uncovered three sorts of reasons for differences in beliefs about distributive justice. One reason is self-interest: people tend to judge arrangements fair when they work to their comparative advantage. I take it that disagreement of this sort is not fundamental in the sense that people who understand what justice is should be willing to revise their beliefs when these are shown to be biased by self-interest. A second reason might be termed "adaptive beliefs": people tend to judge as fair those arrangements that currently obtain, either because they are simply at a loss when asked to say what is fair in the abstract and so take their cues from their surroundings, or possibly because of some deeper need to believe that the existing world is just.[50] Again, disagreement traceable to this source does not seem to be fundamental. People could agree that beliefs which are adaptive in this sense should be discounted, since they reverse the proper relationship between ideas of justice and social institutions: the latter should adapt to the former, not the former to the latter.

The third source of divergence we have encountered is, however, more problematic. I have emphasized the way in which perceptions of the character of the group within which a distribution has to be made will affect the principle of distribution employed, and I have suggested that, for instance, class and national variations in beliefs about justice may be partly traceable to this source. Let us refer to this as the context dependence of beliefs about justice. Now, a theory of justice may accommodate context dependence in the sense that it may incorporate into its own structure the idea that the proper criterion of distribution depends upon the character of the group within which the distribution is to be made: a radical example of this is the pluralistic theory of Michael Walzer referred to earlier. But a problem arises when there is disagreement about the nature of the context itself. Thus there may be consensus that where social relations are competitive, the proper criterion is desert and where they are solidaristic, the proper criterion is need, but there may be disagreement as to whether the set of relations that is actually in question is primarily competitive or primarily solidaristic. People may disagree as to whether their society more closely resembles a competitive maket or a solidaristic community, and this disagreement may issue in a radical divergence in conceptions of social justice.

Under these circumstances, can the theorist adjudicate? Can he or she make a reasonable case that one or the other side has got it wrong? The difficulty is that, although the question at issue turns partly on matters of fact, it also depends on how the people concerned understand their interrelations, and it might be thought that such

50. This is the thesis of Lerner 1980.

understandings are incorrigible from an external point of view. But our very point of departure, namely, that people may not agree on the character of their social relations, also serves the theorist as a point of entry, since in these circumstances not everyone can be right, and it may be possible to give good or even conclusive reasons for one of the available interpretations.[51] The theorist's task is then to use the resources of social science to establish the superior plausibility of one or another of the conceptions of society espoused by his or her target audience. If this can be done, then the evidence presented in this article suggests that agreement on a theory of justice should follow fairly readily. Once people know which social context they are operating in, they will agree in general terms[52] about how to assess the fairness of a distribution of resources. So one upshot of our investigation of the relationship between popular beliefs about justice and normative theories is to highlight the extent to which the latter rely, openly or tacitly, on general ways of conceiving the character of society. Every theory of justice relies on a sociology to ground and make plausible the principles of distribution it propounds.[53]

What elements might we expect to find in a theory of justice that responded to popular belief? A full answer is the topic for another paper, but let me make two simple observations by way of conclusion. The first is that popular opinion seems perfectly at home with the notion of social justice. That is, although people in general may be understandably skeptical about the chances of achieving a perfectly just society, they are quite ready to say in broad terms what such a society would look like and to back changes that would bring it somewhat closer. So theorists such as F. A. Hayek who would regard such a notion as fundamentally misguided can only explain the distance between their own views and popular beliefs by appealing, in effect, to a theory of false consciousness.[54]

The second observation is that popular opinion gives a central place to desert in thinking about justice, and this presents a marked contrast to most recent theoretical work on that topic including, as noted earlier, that of Rawls.[55] In small group settings desert principles compete with principles of equality and need, and the same holds to

51. To give a very simple illustration, if A thinks that he and B are friends, whereas B thinks that she and A are not, the outside observer has conclusive reason to adopt B's view, since friendship must be mutual. Obviously, very few cases will be as clear-cut as this.

52. I remind readers of our earlier finding that people may agree, say, that desert is the main criterion for fixing occupational salaries, while being much less sure of how wide the range of pay differences ought to be.

53. I owe this idea principally to Adam Swift.

54. Hayek (1976) does indeed offer such a theory.

55. I have elaborated on this point in Miller 1991.

some extent of judgments about justice on a society-wide scale, although here the countervailing factors seem weaker, no doubt reflecting the predominantly instrumental and competitive nature of social relations in contemporary Western societies. (I have suggested that this pattern might differ elsewhere.) So it seems an important task of further empirical research to probe more exactly the nature of this popular commitment to desert and of theoretical reflection to see whether a philosophically tenable theory of justice can accommodate such a commitment.

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