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Morey and Les

GEORGE SHER*

In my book *Equality for Inegalitarians*,¹ I combined a sufficientarian approach to the distribution of resources and opportunities with an egalitarian approach to the distribution of a more abstract good that I called “the ability to live one’s life effectively.” As I defined living effectively, it requires a degree of success in the pursuit of one’s rational aims, so there is an obvious danger that even if two people both have sufficient resources and opportunities, the difference in the amount by which they exceed the threshold will cause them to differ in their ability to live effectively. However, to block this implication, I argued that lacking the means to accomplish one’s ends is itself a reason to scale back one’s aspirations. By thus relativizing a person’s rational aims to the resources and opportunities at his disposal, I attempted to reconcile my commitment to the equal distribution of the ability to live effectively with my acceptance of inequality at the level of resources and opportunities.

To illustrate what I had in mind, I offered an example involving the eponymously named Morey and Les. Even if Les has significantly fewer resources than Morey, I wrote, the two may still be equally able to live their lives effectively if the impact of Les’s having fewer resources and opportunities is simply to give him reason to reduce his aspirations by a commensurate amount. If Morey can afford an education at a top law school while the best that Les can do is a year at a local community college, then Morey’s rational ends may include a career in corporate law or high finance while Les’s may extend no further than a steady job at an auto

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1. GEORGE SHER, *EQUALITY FOR INEGALITARIANS* (Cambridge Univ. Press 2014).

body shop. Assuming that Les and Morey are both able to achieve their rational ends, and that nothing else prevents either one from living his life effectively, the prevailing economic inequality will not render their society unjust.²

In the years since the book's publication, this passage has proven troubling to readers who want more equality than I am willing to supply, and my aim in the current paper is to address some of the objections that it elicits. By confronting these objections head-on, I hope both to deflect their force and to clarify the vision that animates the account at which they are addressed.

I.

Perhaps the most obvious objection to my attempt to relativize a person's rational aims to the resources and opportunities at his disposal is that it seems to endorse precisely the kind of adaptive preference formation that has so often served to sustain oppressive social systems. It is clear that a woman who has become comfortable with a repeated cycle of abuse and reconciliation would be better served by the alteration of her preferences than by their satisfaction, and it is no less clear that the tragedy of black servitude is only compounded if its victims come to view their state as natural and inevitable because they're not fit for anything better. More controversially, many feminists dismiss the preferences of women who forgo careers in order to raise their families as the inauthentic products of an unjust patriarchy. In each case, the authority of the parties' preferences, and so too of the aims to which those preferences give rise, is said to be undercut by our recognition of the situational factors to which they were a response.

Can the same be said about whichever of Les's aims are shaped by the modesty of the means at his disposal? One obvious point of discontinuity concerns the psychological mechanisms through which the relevant preferences are formed. In the cases cited above, the parties' preferences are most naturally viewed not as rational responses to their situations—there is little benefit in acquiescing in continued abuse or regarding oneself as worthless—but rather as the non-rational effects of hopelessness or (in the case of traditional women's preferences) social conditioning. By contrast, when Les lowers his sights and replaces an unrealistic aim with one that is within his reach, he will gain the undeniable benefit of being able to *get* what he wants. Thus, whatever their ultimate status, the modest aims at which he arrives will clearly have more going for them than the ones that are standardly dismissed as the products of false consciousness.

2. *Id.* at 128.

If the only thing that was wrong with a preference to remain in an abusive relationship or be subordinated to the will of another were its non-rational origins, then this difference might decisively exonerate Les's adjustment. However, in fact, the non-rationality of their origins *cannot* be the only thing that is wrong with these preferences; for they look even worse if we suppose that their origins *are* rational. The only reason to cultivate such a preference is to make the best of a bad situation that one sees no prospect of escaping; and if the situation is unjust as well as disadvantageous, then the rationality of adapting one's preferences to it will hardly mitigate the injustice. And, similarly, the fact that it is rational for Les to downgrade his aspirations can hardly contribute to the justice of whatever social arrangements *make* their downgrading rational. In Kok-Chor Tan's words, "[r]ather than developing a theory of distributive justice based on what people's adjusted expectations are, don't we first need a theory of distributive justice in order to determine people's legitimate expectations and entitlements?"³

I think Tan is right about this, but I don't think his observation compels us to accept the analogy between Les's preferences and those of the abused wife or the happy slave. The reason we are confident in taking a person's adaptive preferences for subservience or abuse to be objectionable is that we are convinced that no defensible theory of justice could justify any social arrangements that might make it rational for him to cultivate them. However, and in stark contrast, we can't imagine a theory of justice that *doesn't* justify social arrangements that make it rational to trim one's preferences to fit one's resources and opportunities. Because every distributive principle will have to set some limits on the resources and opportunities to which any given person has access, adjusting one's ends to fit one's means is no less rational in a society that is organized around Rawls's difference principle or Dworkin's conception of equality of resources than it is in a society whose members have only the bare minimum they need to survive. Thus, whatever else is wrong with Les's aims, they cannot be faulted simply on the grounds that they are shaped by his accurate sense of his own limits.

This, however, is unlikely to satisfy those who regard his scaled-down ends as objectionable; for there are at least three further ways in which they might press their claim. To do so, they might argue that what is

3. Kok-Chor Tan, *Review of Equality for Inegalitarians*, N.D. PHIL. REV. (Apr. 7, 2015), <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/equality-for-inegalitarians/>. Rehka Nath makes a similar point in her review of the book, which appears in 94 AUSTRALASIAN J. PHIL. 408 (2016).

objectionable about the limitations that give Les reason not to aspire to an advanced education or the advantages it would bring is either that

- (1) Morey is not subject to any similar limitations, or that
- (2) Les's society could eliminate them if it chose to.

Alternatively, and more abstractly, it might be objected that

- (3) when I say that Les's relative lack of resources and opportunities does not diminish his ability to live effectively, my contention already presupposes, and so cannot be used to justify, the claim that there is nothing wrong with the distribution that makes it unreasonable for him to aspire to an advanced education.

Let us examine each objection in turn.

II.

The first objection—that it is unjust for Les but not Morey to be in a situation that makes it unreasonable for him to aspire to an advanced education—is obviously not specific to the current case. A variant of the objection can be expected to arise whenever one person's resources or opportunities give him access to some important advantage to which another lacks access. Its implication, therefore, is that the only just distribution of resources and opportunities is one that approaches equality.

Because the value of a person's resources and opportunities lies in the access they give him to other good things—because resources and opportunities are instrumental goods—this egalitarian approach to their distribution might make sense if (1) justice required an equal (or some related) distribution of certain other, non-instrumental goods, and (2) the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities was the main impediment to that further distribution. However, whatever we say about (1), I think we have good reason to reject (2); for once a person's level of resources and opportunities is high enough to meet his needs and to provide him with basic security—this, very roughly, is what the sufficiency view requires—his fortunes going forward will depend far less on how much additional wealth or opportunity he has than on a variety of external factors over which neither he nor his society can exercise much control. To bring out the pervasive impact of contingency on each person's fortunes, it will be helpful to consider a few examples.

Think, therefore, of a young man who catches a young woman's eye in philosophy class, discovers that she is willing to take a flyer, and initiates what will turn be a long-running involvement. Over the years, he will fare much better if she ends up as his deeply compatible life partner than he

will if she turns out, too late, to be an extreme narcissist or an incorrigible sexual wanderer; yet the gradual unfolding of her personality is something that neither he nor his society can either predict or control. And, along similar lines, the young man will fare better if his children grow into adults with good characters and good lives than if they end up moochers, liars or addicts; better if the demand for his skills increases than if it declines; better if his health holds up than if he suffers chronic pain or a series of debilitating illnesses; and better if those he likes and loves survive than if they die prematurely. On a more daily basis, he will fare better if his new boss is sensible than if he is a jerk; better if his cough disappears than if it turns into bronchitis; better if his house isn't burgled than if it is; better if the cable stays on than if it goes out; and so on without end. In each case, the contingencies that make the difference are not ones that would yield to even the best-designed of social programs.

Given the profound role that fortune plays in determining how each person fares, the fact that Les must spend his time hammering out dents in fenders while Morey is busy hammering out legal settlements will not tell us much about how well either is doing. Some who work in body shops are lucky enough to have close families, enjoy decent health, and achieve many of the aims that are appropriate to their circumstances, while others are less fortunate; and the same obviously holds for those in Morey's profession. Thus, however we understand the non-instrumental goods for whose acquisition one's resources and opportunities are instrumental—whether we are hedonists, desire-satisfactionists, perfectionists, objective listers, or something else—the initial differences in Les's and Morey's resources and opportunities seem unlikely to be the main determinant of their relative levels of well-being going forward.

I don't quite mean that those differences play *no* role. For one thing, even if Les is realistic enough not to aspire to an opulent house or frequent travel, it will presumably remain true that he would prefer to have these things if given a choice. Thus, to whatever extent his well-being depends on the satisfaction of his preferences as opposed to his success in achieving his rational aims, Les's relative inability to satisfy these preferences will indeed represent a respect in which he is worse off. In addition, on the widely held view that choosing autonomously has a value that is distinct from the value of what is chosen, Morey's having a greater range of options from which to choose may represent a further respect in which he is better off. Here, then, are two ways in which the difference in their resources and

opportunities may indeed appear to make a difference in the goodness of their lives.

If either difference were significant, then we would not be entitled to infer, from a society's lack of control over the vicissitudes that play the major role in determining each person's well-being, that it need not bother equalizing whatever further determinants of well-being *do* fall within its control. In that case, the egalitarian could reasonably insist that even if the state can't fully equalize the well-being of its citizens, it is still obligated to go as far as it can in this direction. It seems to me, though, that neither of the cited differences is significant, and that as long as Les and Morey both surpass the relevant threshold for resources and opportunities, no difference that their surpassing it by different amounts can make to either their numbers of satisfied preferences or their ranges of options can have more than a trivial bearing on the goodness of their lives.

To see why it can't matter much that Morey has fewer unsatisfied preferences than Les, we need only remind ourselves of how many preferences of the relevant sort each person has. To say that someone has a preference of this sort for A over B is simply to say that he would choose A over B if asked, so each person has as many such preferences as there are pairs of activities, outcomes, or states of affairs between which he *could* be asked to choose. By this promiscuous standard, Les's unsatisfied preferences for an opulent house and frequent travel are members of the extremely capacious set that also includes his unsatisfied preferences to have a full head of hair rather than a widow's peak, to tan rather than burn, to have a house that never gets dirty, to look like a movie star, to skip work whenever he feels like it, to be smarter, stronger, more attractive, more athletic, and more popular than he is, to live for hundreds of years, and to be able to wiggle his ears, read minds, become invisible, fly a plane, swim the English Channel, jump over the moon, and travel backward and forward in time. I think, in fact, that it is implausible to take the satisfaction or frustration of preferences like these to have *any* impact on Les's well-being, but my argument does not require anything this strong. Instead, the point I need to make is only that even if Les's well-being can be affected by the satisfaction or frustration of preferences like these, his having uncountably many of them must mean both that (1) the frustration of any one or small number of them will reduce his well-being by only a minuscule amount, and that (2) even if slightly fewer of Les's than of Morey's preferences are satisfied, their ratios of satisfied to unsatisfied preferences will remain virtually identical.

The argument of the preceding paragraph presupposes that all of the cited preferences are of equal significance. It therefore may seem vulnerable to the objection that Les's inability to buy a better house or travel extensively seems likely to bother him more, and thus to reduce his well-being by a greater amount, than his inability to jump over the moon or

visit the past. However, to mount an objection of this sort, one would have to treat Les's preferences for a better house and more travel not merely as dispositions to make the relevant hypothetical choices, but rather as the affective and conative echoes of certain incompletely suppressed aspirations. To whatever extent Les still aspires to traveling extensively and having a big house, he has not completely adjusted his aims to the resources at his disposal. However, the claim that I am defending is only that if Les *has* completely adjusted his aims, then he is not made significantly worse off by not having what he no longer seeks but would still go for if given the choice. To this claim, the reactions of the version of Les who has not completely adjusted his aims are simply irrelevant.

The other respect in which Les may be said to be worse off—that he has fewer *options* than Morey—requires different treatment. The reason we cannot simply extend the previous argument, and say that any difference between Les's and Morey's ranges of options is as trivial as the difference between their ratios of satisfied to unsatisfied preferences, is that options are not as easily generated as unsatisfied preferences. There are indefinitely many pairs of states of affairs between which a person can be envisioned as choosing, but there is a vastly smaller number of outcomes that he can actually choose to bring about. Because each person's options are limited in a way that his preferences are not, the number of options that Morey has but Les lacks cannot be assumed to be dwarfed by the number they both have.

Yet even if Les does have significantly fewer options than Morey, it will not follow that he is significantly less autonomous. It is true that a person cannot be autonomous unless he has a suitable range of options from which to choose, but that hardly means that he becomes more autonomous with each addition to his range of options. As many have noted, what autonomy requires is not that an agent have any particular number of options, but only that his options be numerous, diverse, and meaningful enough to enable him to exercise his critical faculties while making choices that matter. For someone like Les, who is above the sufficiency threshold, this requirement will be satisfied as a matter of course. Like most others, Les is bound to face a constant series of decisions about what to buy, how to deal with his children, whether to change jobs or apartments, how to reconcile his and his wife's interests, how to spend his free time, and how to handle the inevitable surprises that complicate every life. Given his modest but steady income and his transferable skills, he can be expected to have some leeway in these matters but to be subject to a definite set of constraints.

Because these are precisely the conditions under which the exercise of practical judgment is both possible and necessary, we need not worry that Les's having fewer options than Morey will make him any less autonomous.

III.

But quite apart from any comparisons with Morey, why should Les *have* to trim his aspirations back? If Les's society can afford to provide him with access to higher education, then why shouldn't it? As long as the resources are available, isn't it unjust for the society to withhold them?

There is a version of this second objection that I can accept. If we assume that Les's society is both (a) rich enough to make access to higher education available to all without compromising any of its more essential functions, and (b) able to do this without either incurring unmanageable debts or saddling its members with unreasonable tax burdens, then it may indeed have good reason to adopt arrangements that would make it unnecessary for someone like Les to trim back his aspirations. Its reasons may include the economic benefits of an educated workforce, the intrinsic value of knowledge, and perhaps also the normative priority of Les's pre-adjustment aims to whichever others he will acquire as he bends to reality. However, even if conditions (a) and (b) are both met, and of course *a fortiori* if they are not, I don't think any of these reasons, or all of them together, can add up to anything approaching an imperative of justice.

To bring the issue into focus, it is crucial to remember that the complaint we are now considering is not a comparative one. What is said to be wrong is not that Morey has access to higher education while Les does not, but only that Les's society does not provide *him* with such access even though it comfortably could. To support the latter complaint, a conception of justice must have a sufficientarian component, and must set its resource and opportunity threshold high enough to provide everyone who meets it with access to an advanced education. Because setting the threshold this high would be quite expensive, it would require a level of taxation that would otherwise not be needed and would absorb resources that could be used in many other ways. These opportunity costs don't mean that universal access to higher education *isn't* a requirement of justice, but they do mean that its having that status isn't an automatic consequence of the society's ability to afford it.

Can this gap in the argument be bridged? One way to do so would be to identify some advantage which is both (1) unavailable to those who lack a higher education and (2) important enough to make its universal availability a requirement of justice. However, the options here are limited by our operating assumption that those who lack access to an advanced education will, like Les, have adjusted their goals accordingly; for on this assumption,

there is nothing of which their lack of access has deprived them that is also something that they want.

Here as above, we may be tempted to insist that there is a sense in which these individuals do want many of the luxuries that are beyond their reach. Even if they no longer aspire to them, they are still likely to want them in the sense that they would prefer to have them if given a choice. However, here again too, the fact that each person has indefinitely many such preferences will imply that the frustration of any small number of them does not make him significantly worse off. Just as the version of Les who has adjusted his aspirations downward was seen to have virtually the same ratio of satisfied to unsatisfied preferences as the more affluent and educated Morey, so too does that version of Les have virtually the same ratio of satisfied to unsatisfied preferences as the imaginary more educated version of himself whose aspirations and attainments are both higher.

Given this difficulty, anyone who wants to argue that those who lack access to an advanced education are made seriously worse off by not being able to get one must take a different tack. He must claim that their having such an education, or having some of the things that it makes possible, would be significantly better for them even though they *don't* want those things. When the things in question are material advantages—when they consist of luxuries like a larger house and the ability to travel—this claim is not particularly plausible. It gains in plausibility when the purported benefits are said *not* to be material—when, for example, they are said to consist of the broadened intellectual horizons that a higher education can bring—but even when it is understood in this way, the claim that having them would make any person's life significantly better remains open to serious objection.

For if we accept it, then what are we to say of those who are either temperamentally unsuited to higher education or intellectually incapable of benefiting from it? If only a higher education can broaden a person's intellectual horizons, and if having broad horizons is enough of a benefit to qualify as a requirement of justice, then won't it follow that anyone who is unsuited to higher education must live a significantly worse life than anyone whose situation is otherwise comparably but who is better educated? And do we really want to say this? Is it really a misfortune to be someone who finds the classroom stifling, joins the army at seventeen, and thrives in the structured environment of the military? Are those who love high school shop class and go to work as machinists really worse off than those who go on to study accounting or deconstruct literary texts?

Must we really pity those who forgo college to support or raise families? And, more generally, are the lives of those who slot comfortably into the intellectually undemanding but necessary jobs that keep things running—the bank tellers, plumbers, shoe salesmen, exterminators, tree trimmers, file clerks, yard workers, bus drivers, custodians, grocery baggers, and mechanics on whom we all rely—really all a step down from those of their college-educated counterparts? At least to my ear, these claims sound insufferably condescending; but unless we accept them, we will have no reason to regard the life that matches Les’s downsized aspirations as any worse than the one he would have lived if he had had reason to set his sights higher.

IV.

Yet even if this is so, there remains a further way of arguing that Les has been deprived of an advantage that his society was under an obligation of justice to provide. Reduced to its essentials, the further argument is that even if Les is no worse off living the life that fits his downsized aspirations than he would be if he hadn’t had to downsize, what remains unjust is his society’s failure to enable him to develop the talents that (we may assume) made him capable of more. The “more” in question can be understood in different ways—either as a more active mental life or as the acquisition of new skills and the accomplishments to which they might have led—but either way, the operative idea is self-realization. What Les has been deprived of, on this reading, is not the opportunity to live the best life, but rather the opportunity to be his best self.

Unlike the previous argument, which implied that not having a higher education is always a misfortune, the current argument implies that the only persons for whom not having such an education is a misfortune are those who are qualified and temperamentally suited for one. For that reason among others, I regard this as the more serious challenge to my claim that Les’s lack of access to higher education is not unjust. However, even when the challenge takes this form, I doubt that the charge of injustice can be sustained.

One obvious problem with the self-realization argument is that it rests on a perfectionist premise that many would reject. However, because I myself have perfectionist leanings, I am not inclined to contest the argument on these grounds. In addition, although I have my doubts, I also won’t question the argument’s premise that expanding the intellectual horizons of the gifted is a requirement of justice, and neither will I challenge the highly idealized view of higher education that underlies the idea that providing

access to it will satisfy such a requirement.⁴ Instead, I want to grant all this and focus exclusively on the *kind* of access to higher education that justice might be said to require. My aim in doing this is to bring out an important difference between the sense in which Les lacks access to higher education and the sense in which justice might plausibly be said to require that he be provided with it.

As of January 2020, the average body shop technician in the United States earned a salary of \$53,081 a year; counting benefits, his job-related income was \$78,339. That's not a fortune, but someone who earns that much has a fair amount of latitude in how he spends it. He can, for example, choose where to live, (sometimes) whether to buy or rent, whether to go away for vacations or stay home, whether to buy a new car or stick with the old one, and whether to frequent restaurants or pack lunches and eat his dinners at home. By going low end on these and other decisions, Les can, at a minimum, save enough to afford further classes at his inexpensive community college. From there the path forward is less certain, but if he's good, he may well be able to take advantage of one of the burgeoning feeder arrangements between two and four year colleges, and may well be able to qualify for at least some financial aid. Moreover, even if Les can't manage either of these things, it seems safe to predict that anyone who has his financial resources and skills and is willing enough to make sacrifices and defer gratification will eventually succeed in acquiring a higher education. Thus, even if the Les whom we have encountered doesn't have Morey's *immediate* access to a horizon-expanding higher education, he does have what he needs to acquire one in the longer term.

Does this form of access satisfy the purported requirement of justice? That depends, of course, on how long Les must wait and how much he

4. Promotional brochures notwithstanding, I think it is fair to say that for most students at most of today's educational institutions, both the aim of attending college and its actual life impact are better described as gaining a needed credential and having some fun away from home than they are as gaining new insight into the human condition. Moreover, in an intellectual environment as rich with taboos as that of today's academy, any paths to new ideas are bound to be strewn with barriers to their pursuit. I don't want to overstate the case: there are obviously many students who do come away from college thinking thoughts they otherwise would never have thought; and some of these new thoughts are even worth thinking. However, there must be some number below which the ratio of those who do experience intellectual and moral growth in college to those who don't is simply too low to make promoting such growth by providing universal access a requirement of justice; and in my own (no doubt jaundiced) view, the ratio in the real world just doesn't make the cut.

must sacrifice. The requirement would presumably not be satisfied if Les couldn't complete his course of study until he was eighty years old, or if he had to spend years working three jobs and living out of his car in order to pay for it. However, in the case as described, the needed sacrifices seem far less extreme, and are surely compatible with Les's living a decent and comfortable life. In addition, precisely because he does have to sacrifice to realize his intellectual potential, Les will, in the process, also be developing an aspect of his *moral* potential. As a result, he will in one respect come closer to realizing his best self than someone who simply has an education handed to him. I don't take this to mean that Morey's society is doing him an injustice by allowing him to acquire a horizon-expanding higher education *without* having to sacrifice for it, but I do think that when the demand for sacrifice is backed by the view that a just society must enable its members to become their best selves, it is at least less inapposite than it would be in many other contexts. In any event, my present point is simply that any reasonable version of the view that a just society must provide the sort of access to higher education that will enable its members to realize their potential is likely to be amply satisfied even by Les's weak form of access.⁵

In mounting this argument, I have relied on statistics about what body shop technicians actually earn. Because Les himself was said to work in a body shop, this is a fair way of rebutting the charge that his income in particular is too low to enable him to acquire the higher education that would unlock his potential. However, anyone who advances that charge about Les will of course also want to extend it to the grocery baggers, yard workers, shoe salesmen, exterminators, and other blue-collar workers who populated our earlier list; and many of these people have incomes that are considerably lower than Les's. Although they too are likely to have some leeway in how they spend their money, they must on average devote more of it than Les to the non-negotiable essentials, and so must sacrifice more, and must do so over a longer period time, to be able to afford a potential-unlocking higher education. A fortiori, the same will hold for whichever day laborers, convicted felons, and unemployables might have the talent and discipline to benefit from a higher education (if, indeed, these individuals have any discretionary income at all). Thus, even if Les's path to self-

5. It is worth noting that whatever case there is for providing Les with this form of access is not undermined by our assumption that he has adjusted his aspirations to match his resources. It is true that under that assumption, Les's believing that he had no chance of acquiring a higher education would have led him not want such an education, and so would have left him unmotivated to make the sacrifices that are necessary to get one. However, it is also true that in a society that does make higher education available to those who are willing to sacrifice for it, Les will not form the belief that he has no chance of acquiring such an education, and so will not have to adjust his aspirations by abandoning whatever desire he might otherwise have for one.

realization is unproblematic enough to satisfy the requirements of justice, it is far from clear that this also holds for those who are lower on the economic ladder.

Let us grant, for purposes of argument, that an affluent society is obligated to provide any of its members who qualify with the kind of access to higher education that is currently available to Les but is *not* available to the average exterminator, checkout clerk, carpet installer, or day laborer. If Les's resources and opportunities surpass the sufficiency threshold, then that threshold must fall somewhere between his level of these goods and that of these individuals. To eliminate injustice, the society must therefore increase the opportunities and resources that are available to checkout clerks, laborers, and the rest until they too are at or above that threshold. While this would indeed make these individuals as able as Les to acquire a higher education by sacrificing and deferring gratification, it would not make them as able as Morey to afford one right away. Thus, even when we extend the self-realization argument to those who have far fewer resources and opportunities than Les, it will not imply that the state must directly subsidize anyone's higher education.

V.

But is even Les's level of resources and opportunities really sufficient for justice? In response to the charge that it is not, I have argued that because Les has reason to trim his ends to fit his means, he will, if rational, be no less able than Morey to achieve his rational aims. However, as Tan has observed, this response will be compelling only if the level of resources and opportunities to which Les has reason to adjust his aims is in fact high enough to satisfy the requirements of justice. Since that is precisely what is at issue, doesn't my argument simply beg the question?

This is the third and final objection I will consider, and once again, there is a version of it that I can accept. It would indeed be fallacious to infer, from the premise that it is rational for Les to trim his ends to fit his means, that the resources and opportunities at his disposal must satisfy the requirements of justice; for it would be no less rational for him to make this adjustment if they did not. However, when the objection is put this way, it does not make solid contact with the argument I am advancing; for my point in observing that it is rational for Les to trim his ends to fit his means is not to *establish* that his resources and opportunities satisfy the requirements of justice, but only to disarm a worry that is raised by the claim that they do. Both here and in the book, my aim in stressing the rationality of the

adjustment is only to show that even if two rational individuals exceed a defensible sufficiency threshold by very different amounts, that difference need not translate into either an indefensible difference in their ability to achieve their aims or an indefensible deficit in the worse-off person's ability to do so. Just how high a defensible sufficiency threshold should be set, and indeed whether justice is a matter of sufficiency at all, are independent questions that must be resolved on other grounds. I believe, in fact, that the sufficiency approach is correct, and I believe as well that the considerations that determine the location of the resource/opportunity threshold are closely linked to those that support the view that Les's weak and indirect form of access to higher education is good enough;⁶ but these are not the claims that I am defending here.

To end, I want to raise, without trying to answer, a further question that so far has hovered just offstage. The source of that question is the gap between the claim that Les has good reason to adjust his ends to fit his means and the further claim that he, or someone in his position, would in fact do so. Because Les is a creature of my imagination, I can close the gap in his case by simply stipulating that he does make the adjustment, but the real world is bound to contain many who will not. When someone fails to adjust his ends to fit his means, his ability to live his life effectively is compromised, and his inability to achieve the sorts of goals that are within the reach of others is likely to be keenly felt. If someone who surpasses the threshold falls short in these ways, is it still legitimate to respond to the charge of injustice by pointing out that he could avoid the difficulty by making the adjustments that rationality dictates?

I am of two minds about this question. On the one hand, in an environment in which unearned inequalities of wealth and opportunity are both common and salient, it seems natural enough for someone who has less than others to wonder why that should be so, and to resent the limitations on what he can do in a way that makes it difficult for him to reconcile himself to them. If the difficulty of fully internalizing a revised set of ends is great enough, the claim that his situation remains just because a rational person in his situation would do so begins to ring hollow. However, on the other hand, the state can do only so much, and if a non-comparative approach to distributive justice is in fact defensible, as the sufficientarian takes it to

6. Put most simply, the sufficiency threshold as I understand it is the lowest level of resources and opportunities at which an agent becomes able to do things that give him a reasonable chance of increasing his stock of resources and opportunities at a reasonable rate without having to endure unreasonable hardships; for elaboration, see Chapter 8 of *EQUALITY FOR INEGALITARIANS*, *supra* note 1. The claim that someone in Les's position has an adequate amount of control over his educational future is a special case of the broader claim that someone who meets or exceeds this threshold has an adequate amount of control over his future life.

be, then it may well be thought to have discharged its obligations by elevating each citizen to a defensible threshold. Even in a totally just world, navigating life's vicissitudes is often hard, and as long as the obstacles that one faces are not otherwise unjust, it is not clear why the difficulty of overcoming one's resentment at the fact that others don't have to face them should alter that status.

As is perhaps obvious, my own inclination is to favor the second of these approaches, in part because I view the human propensity to envy others as an unattractive reason to alter our thinking about justice. I must acknowledge, though, that because I am writing this from the perspective of someone who is not himself called upon to do much downsizing, the position I am defending may have a let-them-eat-cakeish quality that makes it equally unattractive to those who occupy a different perspective.

