

A More Pluralistic Ethic: In Response to DeMarco and Richmond

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By contrasting alternative moral responses to inequality Joseph P. DeMarco and Samuel A. Richmond have identified a major area of contemporary moral uncertainty. Some readers will object to the fact that their argument is buttressed by reference to a "no growth" future that is said to make obsolete the ethical answers that have satisfied us in the past. And indeed a strong argument can be made that growth will be with us for a long while yet, and this is almost surely the case if growth is seen qualitatively rather than quantitatively. However, their emphasis on this contemporary question should not be allowed to lead us astray, for the dilemmas of inequality are always with us. Most ethical thought has occurred in societies with essentially no growth presuppositions, and whatever doctrines we favor must be able to deal with such conditions. It is on this more fundamental, timeless, level that the argument should move.

On this level the authors develop their argument as an answer to John Rawls's recent and popular *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls attempted to get beyond simple utilitarianism by constructing a contract theory that gives primacy to individual liberty and that emphasizes distributive justice rather than overall social benefit. Rawls argues that the justification for any social or economic inequalities must be that these inequalities are ultimately beneficial for the least well-off in the society. Benefit to society "as a whole" is no longer to be considered an acceptable argument. Thus, although Rawls puts a heavier burden of proof than do the utilitarians on those who would justify inequality, his potential justification of some inequalities is apparently too much of a concession to liberal economics. DeMarco and Richmond want economic equality of result to be a primary social goal without qualifications.

(Incidentally, in treating Rawls, the authors seriously misrepresent what Rawls is about. When Rawls gives priority to liberty, he is *not* concerned primarily with

economic liberty, and certainly cannot be accused of placing "human liberty above human welfare." What he is saying is that at least in advanced societies a decent respect for certain civil and political rights is the basic ground of the just society—or, in other words, that spiritual welfare is ultimately superior to material welfare. If we are to misunderstand "liberty" as a code word for liberal economics, discussion of social issues among those with different views will become impossible.)

But let us turn to the authors' central proposal. They propose an ethical doctrine of "Justice as Respect," in which "The just society...secures and maintains respect for persons through social arrangements that are in the common interest but not to the greater advantage of some than others." At first this sounds like a statement most of us could readily accept, but the authors idiosyncratically define its key terms in such a way that "Justice as Respect" becomes a thoroughgoing egalitarianism. They achieve this result by systematically confusing throughout the article the concept of justice and the concept of equality (as, of course, does Rawls), and by then failing to distinguish among the multitude of definitions of equality, particularly the distinction of equality of opportunity and equality of result.

They label their theory as one of "justice" rather than of "equality," because they expect their readers will readily assent to a theory of justice but will not easily agree that society should be based on "equality" as they define the term. However, since in ordinary usage justice and equality often have quite different meanings, if DeMarco and Richmond are to identify the terms, they must make a stronger case for their identity than they have. Ordinarily justice means that each person receives his just reward, and traditionally this has meant that effort, whether material or spiritual, is rewarded, while lack of effort is not. It is *just* for the criminal to be punished, and *unjust* to the law-abiding for the criminal to go unpunished.

Equality can either be defined, cognate to justice, as that condition in which equal reward is received for equal effort, or it can be defined as that condition in

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which rewards are generally equal regardless of effort. It is this latter definition that DeMarco and Richmond employ. The confusion of the demand for equality with the demand for justice stems from observing the poor man who works as hard and as diligently as the rich man and yet receives so much less for his effort. This is both inequality and injustice. But if one poor man works while one loafes, and the society gives each the same recompense, this is equality of result, but it is also *injustice*.

I would argue that injustice in the last case is also *disrespect* for both individuals, for it ignores their human ability to choose. Let us imagine the case of two brothers living in a world before growth and no growth. One brother works hard, avoids temptation, becomes a respected member of the community and is honored in his old age. The other brother, apparently as strong and bright, follows every whim, is unreliable, and is not honored in his old age. Two attitudes are possible. From a traditional and moral point of view we can regard them as persons capable of making choices. From this viewpoint, each reaps the rewards of his choices, and their stories are read as examples to others.

Or we can take the scientific view that these are two organisms that cannot help what they do. From this viewpoint each is equally worthy of reward and honor, and no moral lessons can be drawn. The second viewpoint is ultimately that of DeMarco and Richmond. In their article they identify an analogous dehumanization of man with technocratic utilitarianism; apparently they have not thought through the implications of their view that no basis of inequality—"even ability or merit"—is to stand in the way of equal rewards.

Invariably, doing away with differential reward for merit reduces the freedom of persons to choose a less socially accepted adaptation. For in the real world no society will reduce differential reward without also reducing differential contribution—as its leaders define contribution. For example, in Communist societies living standards are more egalitarian than in some capitalist societies, but concomitantly Communist societies have found it necessary to use compulsion to force reluctant workers to earn their rewards. The modern behaviorist would achieve the same result by more careful training. From the point of view of the ethicist this Skinnerian training is designed to take away choice, but from the behaviorist point of view it is only a reorganization of deterministic forces—there was no choice in any event.

Unfortunately, this attitude that societies must provide more egalitarian living conditions too often leads to paternalistic dictation by even the best intentioned. In *The Longest Mile* Rena Gazaway describes her frustrating attempt to help the people of Kentucky "hollows." In the end she proposes a plan to indoctrinate mountaineer children forcibly with middle- or working-class values and skills in a highly structured and disciplined setting. With training in anthropology and public health it was obviously a struggle for

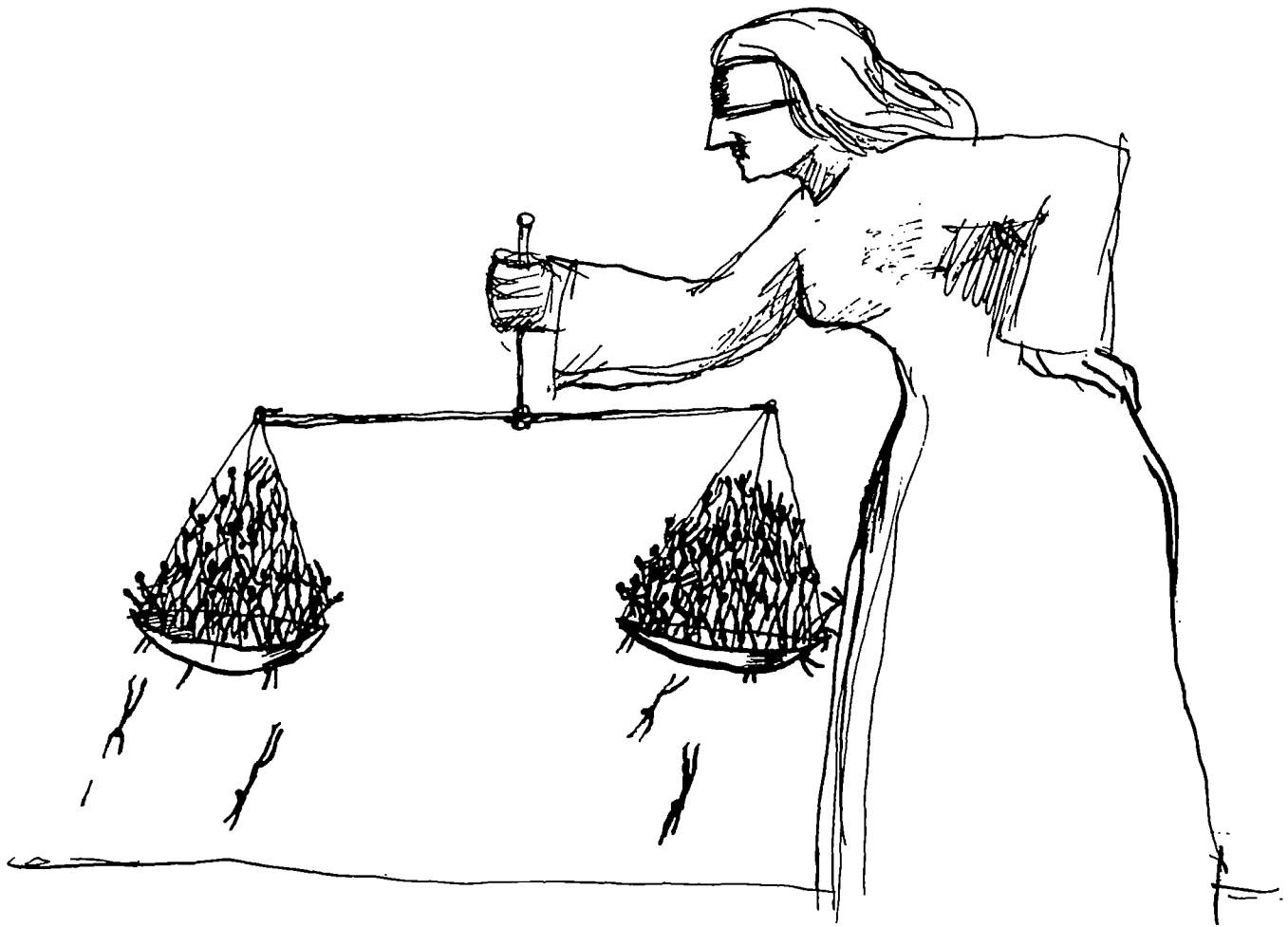
Gazaway to come to this conclusion. Yet with her background she knew that in America no one should "live like that." And without a shock treatment she saw nothing for the people of the hollows but an endless future of deprivation and dependency.

Gazaway is materially right, but she is spiritually wrong. A more respectful view would be that the people of the hollows do not have a right to our charity above the barest minimum, but neither do we have a right to force them to be different than they are. Working out a compromise between our desires and theirs, establishing reciprocal responsibilities, will require particular knowledge of their culture as well as a certain amount of controlled "benign neglect." The relation of the larger society to the hollows is in many respects an extreme example of the relationships that exist among many cultural groups in the world. How we handle these relations remains a critical part of a future in which demands that we achieve equality may easily result in coerced conformity to the latest accepted version of the good life.

However, if defined more traditionally, I would find a great deal in DeMarco and Richmond's doctrine of respect, a doctrine not too different from Rawls's priority of liberty or even Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life. I would conceive respect as a spiritual attitude toward all others, a secular version of the Christian concept of the ultimate value of every individual soul. This is what Kant means by his assertion that persons are always ends in themselves and never means. Beyond securing certain basic rights in these terms, the struggle for black dignity or for women's liberation is for equal reward for equal work rather than a demeaning struggle for equality regardless of performance.

Objectively, the doctrine of respect would lead in my mind to acceptance of a basic set of rules as to how we treat human beings, much in the same sense that the "equality" of men was originally understood at the birth of our nation. Such rules might include an equal right to vote (after an appropriate age), a right to express rational opinions, the right to be free of bondage to another, rights to privacy, and specified rights to live that might include the rejection of capital punishment and the right to at least minimum access to food and medical care in affluent societies.

But however we develop a particular concept—whether it be respect as minimum acceptance of the humanity of our fellows, or some other—it would be a mistake to assume that the good society will be one based on any single principle. Since real people live in terms of a variety of values, values that often conflict, an acceptable ethic must incorporate and try to balance this conflict. For example, the resolution of the problem of social inequality must be one that balances a utilitarian calculus based on the good of the whole with a doctrine of respect or even reverence for human personality that sets irrevocable limits on the ways open to us to achieve the good of the whole. Similarly, the desire to give just reward in traditional terms for equal effort or sacrifice must be balanced by our utilitarian knowledge that all will be helped if the reward structure



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allocates persons to the positions in which they can make the greatest social contribution. Human beings will differ, of course, on the weight they would give to different concerns in such a pluralistic ethic. But at least we will be further toward the goal of the good society if we recognize the unavoidable complexity of the concerns of its members.

In searching for such a pluralistic ethic we cannot afford to confuse the spiritual and material dimensions of life. By incorporating certain rules or limits on the manner in which human beings are treated we have allowed a spiritual dimension into our calculus. We have placed a barrier on calculations of benefit or distribution. This suggests that the goal of life in the good society cannot simply be human happiness, and that understanding its moral dimension goes beyond questions such as the proper division of units of happiness among individuals.

This point will be strengthened if we consider another spiritual dimension that is left out of individualistic ethics such as that of DeMarco and and Richmond or

Rawls. While living in and enjoying the everyday world of day-to-day life, human beings also have the capacity to transcend that life by going beyond it. "Nutrition and life-supporting health care services" are important, but they describe, after all, only one dimension of human life. Taken in isolation such goods are best provided in a hospital or sanatorium, or the organized spaces of the *Brave New World*. A comprehensive ethics must deal with more dimensions, for humankind will and should demand more. Chinese civilization, for example, produced a wide variety of moral, aesthetic, and scientific achievements, and yet these were made possible by the inequalities, rude transgressions, and egregious disutilities of millennia. Nevertheless, we honor those who made possible such achievement more highly than the forgotten peoples in the more egalitarian and more primitive societies on the ever receding periphery of Chinese culture. If we face these facts of human history and human judgment, then we will want our moral concern to lead us to strive to maintain a balance between the satisfaction of transcendent values and the values we derive from utilitarianism, egalitarianism, and the necessity for fixed rules or limits.