

In *Why Not Socialism?* Canadian political philosopher G. A. Cohen argues that socialism is intrinsically superior to capitalism. That is, practicality and feasibility aside, the implementation of socialist systems on a society-wide scale is morally preferable to the like implementation of capitalism. In a parody paper, *Why Not Capitalism?*, American philosopher Jason Brennan rejects Cohen's hypothesis by arguing that Cohen's method of comparing the two systems is undeniably biased toward socialism. In this paper I will explain Cohen's argument for the moral desirability of socialism, Brennan's rebuttal, and critically examine the competing arguments. While I do not explicitly take a side in the debate of which system is more desirable, I will ultimately argue that Brennan's rebuttal is substantially flawed and not an adequate objection to Cohen.

### Cohen's Argument

To demonstrate the moral desirability of socialism over capitalism, Cohen compares the implementation of both systems in the same context: a camping trip. If we were to imagine an extended camping trip amongst friends, which system would provide the more desirable allocation of labor and resources to promote a common aim of "having a good time"? More specifically, should facilities such as pots and pans, fishing rods, and canoes be characterized by private or collective ownership and should labor, such as fishing, cooking, and washing be done on a communal or individual basis?

In a camping trip governed by principles of market exchange and private ownership, Cohen argues, it is not difficult to imagine the collapse of our aforementioned common objective. Under a system that celebrates greed, each camper would assert strict rights over the tools and labor they "bring to the table" which would ultimately overshadow sentiments of fellowship that are fundamental to any good camping trip; we can expect the owner of the cooking ware demanding compensation for its use, the most skilled fisher to demand the best food, the finder of a ripe apple tree being unwilling to share, and so forth. Evidently, constant negotiation and the emergence of inequalities would stain the fabric of our camping trip by estranging the members of the camping community.

On the other hand, Cohen argues, socialist principles that establish common understandings of duties and collective ownership along with egalitarian principles would lend themselves much better to a successful camping trip. As is more typical with camping, tools and facilities would be under collective control and campers would select, perhaps out of preference or superior skill, and perform their labor for the group as a whole. According to Cohen, the principles that would coincide with such a socialist structure would be ones of equality of opportunity and communal reciprocity. The former involves removal of all unearned advantages, including institutional privileges (e.g, race, social status), unearned endowments (e.g, inheritance), and inborn differences (e.g, innate strength). In place of typical market motives of greed and fear, the latter principle holds that campers maintain commitment to one another and serve each other for its

own sake, not for any personal gain. Under these ideals of community, the campers would not tolerate even legitimate equalities that arise from free-choice and compensate each other accordingly to preserve fellowship. Accordingly, unlike in the capitalist camping trip, we can imagine A using B's stove and pots to cook fish captured by C for the entire group without the burden of negotiation nor tensions caused by inequality.

At first glance, Cohen's argument appears to be overly simplistic. How can one argue in favor of the widespread implementation of a complex economic system using a camping trip analogy? However, this is an intentional feature of the comparison; absent of economic elements that may complicate the implementation of socialism, such as competing social groups and imperfect information, the camping trip analogy successfully directs the attention of our comparison to the relative desirability of the two systems, not feasibility. Simply put, if socialism is desirable on a smaller scale as the camping trip has demonstrated, it follows that it would also be preferred on a societal level. That is, the generosity, community, and wisdom of the socialist camping trip is intrinsically more desirable than its greedy, callous, and antagonistically competitive counterpart.

### Brennan's Rebuttal

Given the scenario laid out by Cohen, Brennan indeed agrees that the socialist version of the camping trip appears more desirable and that a society operating in this fashion would be an improvement from our current capitalistic world. However, Brennan argues that Cohen's comparison is inherently unfair because it compares an idealized socialist regime to a realistic capitalist one. More specifically, in the socialist version of the camping trip, Cohen stipulates that campers are generous and strive to improve community welfare, while in the capitalist version, campers are stipulated to be greedy and motivated by selfish desires. Accordingly, Brennan contends that all the comparison shows is that a "world of socialism with morally perfect people is better than our [capitalist] world, with real, flawed people."<sup>1</sup>

To illustrate the flaw in Cohen's comparison, what he dubs as the "Cohen fallacy," Brennan conjures up a different scenario that compares idealized capitalism to realistic socialism. In this parody example, Brennan compares historical socialist regimes of the likes of the DPRK and communist Cuba to the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse Village, a capitalist utopia. In short, the comparison somewhat mocks the camping trip example by reversing it and replacing campers with Disney characters. Life under the socialist version is characterized by oppressive leadership, restrictions of freedom, famine, and other flaws that have defined socialist experiments of the past while life under the capitalist system is perfect; villagers hold privately owned estates and property to fulfill their separate goals and projects whilst maintaining a perfect spirit of fellowship that allows them to work together for common aims, maintain societal welfare, contribute to the social surplus, and help each other in their private endeavors. The principles that define this capitalist utopia are ones of mutual respect, reciprocity, social justice, and

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<sup>1</sup> Brennan, Jason. *Why Not Capitalism?* New York, NY : Routledge, 2014. Page 60

beneficence while the socialist regime is characterized by the violent enforcement of restrictive laws and regulations. These principles that characterize capitalist utopia are similar to Cohen's egalitarian principles with a few notable exceptions: villagers only require "sufficient" equality of opportunity, are void of envy and therefore tolerate inequality, and get satisfaction from providing others with value for value in market exchanges.

Closely related to the Cohen fallacy is Brennan's argument that Cohen unjustly attaches moral principles and dispositions to socialism. According to Brennan, socialism, capitalism and other economic systems are simply just designs for resource allocation. That is, the widespread manifestation of altruism is not necessary for a society to be considered socialist; along with other structural differences, a society is socialist if means of production are owned collectively. Just as a morally virtuous and community-oriented population will improve overall welfare and efficiency in a socialist country, it would do the same in a capitalist one. While legitimate analytical arguments can be made that certain systems dispose people to act more or less morally virtuous, Cohen makes no such argument; he bakes moral virtues into his conception of socialism without any appeal to social-scientific research.

#### Analysis: Ideal to Ideal

The crux of the ideological feud between Cohen and Brennan boils down to a question about the ideal society. That is, if we could remedy all informational issues related to efficient allocations and transform human nature to our liking, what economic system would we want? The importance of this debate to the argument for socialism cannot be understated; since the practicality of socialism relative to capitalism is highly questionable, its intrinsic desirability must be explicit to give any credence to pro-socialist arguments.

While Brennan is quick to make a distinction between realistic and idealistic, it appears that he fails to emphasize the role possibility plays in the two. An idealistic conception, at least in the way both philosophers use the term, closely resembles perfection and is difficult and/or unlikely to be realized. However, no matter how unlikely an idealistic conception is, it must be possible. For example, my life goal to become president is idealistic while my wish to have been born in the 19th century is not idealistic, it is simply impossible. Although Brennan may believe ideal socialism is improbable, he characterizes it as idealistic and therefore grants it as at least conceptually plausible. After all, the socialist camping trip is actually a fairly realistic characterization of most outdoor expeditions; the idealistic element stems from the difficulty of scaling it onto a massive population. However, I will now argue that the capitalist utopia Brennan depicts in response to the socialist camping trip is not idealistic, but impossible and therefore not a compelling case against the desirability of socialism. More specifically, I argue that it is not conceptually plausible for the competitive market forces of capitalism to coexist with the moral virtues Brennan attributes to the capitalist society.

To reiterate, villagers in Brennan's capitalist utopia all strive to live fulfilling lives whilst, out of altruism, strive to ensure others have fulfilling lives. Villagers lead their meaningful lives by contributing to and using public goods and by pursuing separate, private projects. Villagers, using their own competencies and private property, engage in private endeavors that give them meaning and take joy in the value the projects provide to the wider community. For example, Clarabelle cow owns a sundries store and muffin factory whilst Professor Von Drake (PVD) manufactures and sells mouskatools using his nanotech machine.

Though this appears all well and good, Brennan does not address the inevitable occurrence of these private enterprises conflicting with one another: competition. What happens when Goofy decides that it is his life mission to be an inventor and enters the market for mouskatools? Imagine that Goofy is a natural, and produces new mouskatools with ease that put PVD's mouskatools to shame. Unfortunately for PVD, Mickey Mouse Clubhouse villagers "cannot make themselves charity by choice" and only "trade value for value."<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Goofy steals all the demand for mouskatools away from PVD who now is stripped of his satisfaction from serving others and is put on the verge of bankruptcy. To save his business and life aspirations, PVD now sacrifices all of his leisure time to invent a mouskatool comparable to Goofy's and cuts his profit margins to barely make ends meet. Suddenly, Goofy and all those other villagers who have been outcompeted in capitalist utopia want to move to socialist utopia. What happened?

It is important to note here that the scenario just illustrated is not some subtle, meticulously crafted objection to Brennan's capitalist utopia that can be patched up with some additional stipulations. In a capitalist setting where agents are given the liberty to pursue their own aspirations, it is inevitable that some of these pursuits will clash with one another. In fact, this is a fundamental feature of capitalism; competition creates a market-survival-of-the-fittest rivalry that ultimately leads to the "innovation and efficiency" that Brennan commends capitalism for!<sup>3</sup> In this sense, Brennan's stipulations that "villagers do not interfere with one another's projects" and have the "freedom to flourish" are incompatible with the existential threat rivalry poses to producers in the Mickey Mouse Village.<sup>4</sup> In essence, Brennan's capitalist utopia appears to boast the benefits of capitalism while not addressing the inevitable losers.

The most substantial objection to the above argument is that since Mickey Mouse Clubhouse villagers have been stipulated to be beneficent and altruistic, they would never allow PVD to suffer at the invisible hands of capitalism. More specifically, Goofy, ill-stricken by the toll his enterprise has taken on PVD may decide to ramp down operations or increase prices to provide PVD with more business. However, as aforementioned, this would effectively eliminate the competition necessary for capitalism. Now consumers would be forced to either pay

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<sup>2</sup> Brennan, Jason. Page 32

<sup>3</sup> Brennan, Jason. Page 4

<sup>4</sup> Brennan, Jason. Page 31

unnecessarily high prices for their preferred mouskatool or accept its inferior counterpart. Worse yet, the mouskatool industry would experience severe technological stagnation. With no competition, Goofy would have no incentive to develop better mouskatools; in fact, he may actually be disincentivized to innovate as this would place the burden of rivalry on PVD. Indeed, PVD may still have reason to improve his products, but this implies that innovation would be determined by the least competent producers in the market, not the best.

The issues of this “altruistic competition” objection are more severe when we consider an actual market with hundreds or thousands of benevolent producers. How would producers know when their operations are placing a strain on others? With so many factors impacting the relative capabilities of the firms such as innate competencies, inherited endowments, and luck, it would be impossible to ensure the well-being of everyone. In fact, with a population as morally virtuous and wise as those of the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse Village, one would think that they would simply decide to work collectively to fulfill their aspirations and provide value to the community. Maybe they should move to socialist utopia.

In conclusion, while one may concede to Brennan that Cohen does a less than fair job of depicting what capitalist utopia would look like, Brennan is incorrect in assuming that the selfless principles inherent to ideal socialism are just as attributable to ideal capitalism. Capitalism necessarily results in winners and losers that impedes the ability of the latter group to self-actualize in a competitive market. This restriction of liberty would not be tolerated by an altruistic, community-oriented society.