What We Deserve: The Moral Origins of Economic Inequality and Our Policy Responses to It

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Abstract

This dissertation is about economic inequality and why it thrives in a country with professedly egalitarian values. I propose that people's economic behavior and policy preferences are largely driven by their understanding of deservingness. So long as a person believes that their compatriots are generally served their economic due, economic outcomes require no tampering, at least on moral grounds. People may tolerate grave inequalities—inequalities that trouble them, even—if they think those inequalities are deserved. Indeed, if outcomes appear deserved, altering them constitutes an unjust act. Resources meted to the undeserving, conversely, require correction.

To begin, I show how desert unifies behavioral research into the otherwise disparate notions of justice that social scientists usually cite. Desert I treat as a social institution, one that helps resolve a common multiple-equilibria problem: the allocation of wealth and socioeconomic station. As a natural phenomenon emerging from repeated human interaction, individuals are motivated to ensure desert's reward. The precise definition of desert, however, will vary across cultures and individuals. I use surveys, survey experiments, and economic experiments to determine how different segments of the American population define economic desert. I then use those surveys and experiments to measure the extent to which different sub-populations believe that economic desert is actually rewarded. Finally, I show that these two variables—definition of economic desert and faith in its reward—shape an individual's willingness to redistribute wealth, both in the laboratory and through national policy, and often at a detriment to personal financial wellbeing.

1 | Introduction

God, Psalms assures us, "has not dealt with us as our sins merit, nor requited us as our wrongs deserve" (*New American Bible* 2011, Psalms 103:10). Meanwhile, Jeremiah promises that God will search our hearts and test our inner motivations "in order to give everyone what his actions and conduct deserve" (*Complete Jewish Bible* 2007, Jeremiah 17:10).[1] God can embody such paradoxes, but we humans have neither the luxury of absolute mercy nor the responsibility of infallible judgement. Our pursuit for a peaceable, productive coexistence with one another leads us down a middle road when it comes to justice. We have, over repeated interactions, fashioned our own definitions of desert, evolving social institutions by which we allocate various goods, treatments, and duties. And despite our drive to treat people justly—giving them the rewards and punishments we think they deserve—we do so with questionable accuracy. In no area of community life is this tension more apparent than in the distribution of economic resources, where the haves may be separated from the have-nots to an unsettling, but not necessarily unjust, degree.

Of all the disparities with which Americans have dabbled, economic inequality has received the most attention of late. The rich are becoming richer at a rate that far outpaces the economic growth enjoyed by the average citizen. The extremely rich, in turn, are far outperforming the merely wealthy (Bartels 2008; Piketty and Saez 2003). These trends are reaching historic levels with important ramifications for our political and commercial health. Elected officials are "utterly unresponsive" to the policy preferences of the financial underclass (Bartels 2008, 2; Enns and Wlezien 2011), and three-quarters of Americans insist that large differences in income are unnecessary for or harmful to American prosperity (Smith et al. 2013). Great scholastic effort has

[1] I chose these specific renditions because of their use of the word "deserve", and because of the care the respective translators take in explaining their methods and philosophies. There are many other translations of The Old Testament, many of which also use the word "deserve", and those that do not nonetheless capture the spirit of the concept. Please note that you can find these same verses in the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*): Psalms (*Tehillim*) within the Scriptures (*K'tuvim*) and Jeremiah (*Yirmiyahu*) within the writings of the Prophets (*Nevi'im*).

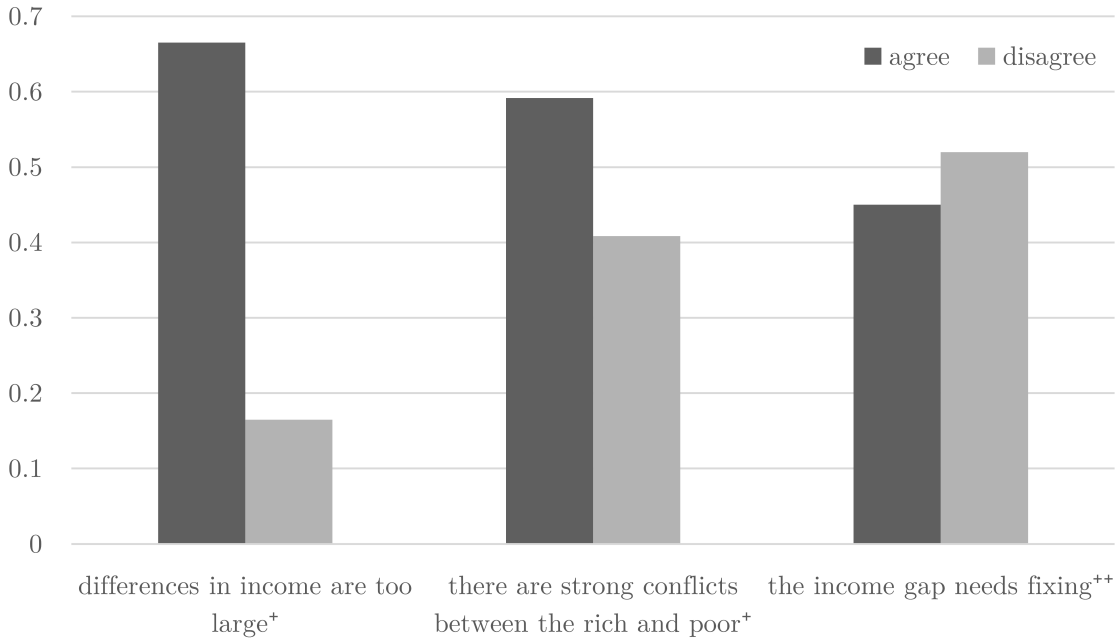
been expended to better understand the origins of and opinions toward economic disparities, and researchers have been careful to note its influence and its perceived influence on political representation and economic efficiency.[2] But inequality is also a moral question; a question of principles and right (Frankfurt 1987; Rawls 1971).

As America enters a "new gilded age," we are confronted with a basic question: What does it mean to deserve wealth and poverty? Appreciating how different people answer that question is critical to understanding the origins of myriad social policies and ills. People have in their heads notions of economic justice, notions of what kinds of people deserve what positions along the socio-economic ladder. So long as a person believes that their compatriots are generally served their economic due, economic outcomes require no tampering. People may tolerate grave inequalities—inequalities that trouble them, even—if they think those inequalities are deserved. Indeed if outcomes appear deserved, altering them would constitute an immoral act. Conversely, economic standing meted unjustly requires correction.

Majorities simultaneously despair at economic inequality and refuse to address it, as Figure 1.1 shows. Scholars have puzzled at and argued over this apparently contradictory worldview, over the bizarre American combinations of egalitarian values and worsening class division, of glaring economic disparities and a weak welfare state. How can the self-proclaimed "land of opportunity" so routinely leave so many behind? My argument is simple: Many Americans cannot shake the belief that people get what they deserve; that however unattractive inequality may be, it is justly derived. For others, their specific definitions of economic desert prohibit most avenues to address inequality. Put simply, the practical and aesthetic motivations to ignore or address economic inequality are to some degree trumped by moral considerations. However useful an individual believes the gulf between rich and poor is for encouraging productivity, that does not mean she believes such separation is fair. And an individual who sees wealth imbalances as hurtful to the democratic functioning of government may not view those imbalances as unjust. It is not enough to know about and be alarmed by inequality—inequality must be perceived as undeserved to motivate a behavioral response.

[2]For studies on the genesis and growth of contemporary economic inequality, see: Bartels (2008); Danziger and Gottschalk (1995); Frank and Cook (1996); Gottschalk (1997); Jencks (2002); McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal (2006). For studies on public opinion toward inequality, see: Bartels (2008); Hochschild (1981); Page and Jacobs (2009); Page and Shapiro (1992).

Figure 1.1: Incongruent public opinion?



Sources: + Calculations based 2010 General Social Survey data (N = 1,512).
++ Calculations based Nov. 28–Dec. 1, 2011 Gallup poll data (N = 1,012)

All this talk about desert and justice may seem a bit out of place in a social science dissertation. Social scientists, after all, have spent much brainpower and ink showing humans to be strategic and fundamentally self-serving. Why expect such creatures to worry themselves with the moral underpinnings of inequality? Because doing so benefits them. Neuroscientists and social psychologists have convincingly shown that morality is at once innate—built in to the human mind—and learned (e.g., Haidt and Joseph 2004; Tabibnia, Satpute and Lieberman 2008). Not only is there an intuitive, deeply-rooted drive for people to evaluate the justness of a given behavior, but recent syntheses of anthropological, psychological, and economic research suggest that justice can be conceived of and modeled as an institution (Binmore 1994, 1998, 2009*b*, 2011). There is not an ideal profile of inequality, as some argue (Alesina and Giuliano 2011). Nor is there is some absolute conception of fairness for which people have varying tastes, as many experimental economists used to contend (Binmore and Shaked 2010). Rather, repeated interactions between people result in norms, many of which are construed as moral precepts, and deviations from those norms elicit personal costs (Crawford and Ostrom 1995; Ostrom 2005). As such, justice and similar moral considerations can be expected to help constitute the "rules of the game in a society" (North 1990, 1), generating

a "regularity of social behavior" (Greif 2006, 30).

In the course of "organizing repeated human interactions" (Ostrom 2005, 3), norms and institutions help to solve multiple equilibria problems (Binmore 2009*b*). One such problem is the distribution of wealth. Wealth can be distributed in all sorts of ways that could constitute a stable equilibrium. It can be held by a class favored on account of ancestry, religion, race, gender, sex, birth order, or place of origin. It can be divided evenly among a population, or directed toward those who derive the most utility from it. It can be taken by the cleverest, or earned by the assiduous. To adjudicate between these and numerous other options, we appeal to our definition of *desert*. A bargain or social arrangement is "just" if it rewards desert. Compared to someone else, you may be more, less, or equally deserving of some outcome. A person who believes the very wealthy and the very poor *deserve* their economic positions has no immediate moral difficulty with economic inequality. Not so for a person who thinks that wealth tends to be kept from the deserving or held by the undeserving.

According to this account, desert is an emergent phenomenon. More generally, the moral rules that govern our behavior are shaped by and subject to evolutionary forces, biological and social (Binmore 2011; Mackie 1977; Skyrms 1996). There is nothing novel in this assertion. The notion was ably formulated by David Hume in 1739, and the theoretical lineage of justice as a natural phenomenon can be traced through Thomas Hobbes to as far back as Aristotle in the 3rd century BCE.[3] An equally illustrious tradition treats morality as a metaphysical matter, our duties (sometimes literally) set in stone for us to discover and abide. Many of history's great thinkers have tackled moral questions with such *a priori* reasoning. Plato's (2000) Forms, Kant's (1997) practical reason, Rousseau's (1968) general will, Moore's (1993) moral intuition—each requires a wave of the metaphysical wand to function. Even hardnosed logicians and economists have acquiesced to ipsedixist thinking. Both John Rawls (1971) and John Harsanyi (1977) appeal to supernatural enforcers—natural duty and moral commitment, respectively—in their seminal defenses of egalitarian and utilitarian fairness norms (Binmore 2009*b*). Metaphysicians offer useful insights into morality and related concepts, but those insights sit atop unsure theoretical foundations (Binmore

[3]See Hume (2011), Hobbes (2008), and Aristotle (1999). Mathematician-turned-economist Ken Binmore (1994; 1998; 2011) is perhaps the most vocal contemporary champion of natural justice, at least in the social sciences. He provides an accessible if one-sided ancestry to his scientific, naturalistic approach to moral philosophy in chapter three of his 2011 volume.

2009*a*).

If we are agreed on this point and willing to approach justice on scientific grounds, we can proceed with the task at hand, namely: Figuring out whether and to what degree our understandings of economic deservingness influence American inequality and our policy responses to it. Toward that end, I will take the following steps. First, I finish this introductory chapter with a note on data collection. Then in Chapter 2 I review the existing literature on economic justice and propose an expanded role for desert. Desert, I argue, serves as a bridge between the many different kinds of justice social scientists have contrived, and its everyday use in conversation hides its position as a critical part of our formal and informal social institutions. In Chapters **??** and **??** I place some parameters on economic desert as various American sub-populations define it. Specifically, I determine the importance of personal responsibility and proportionality to definitions of economic desert, and see how the presence or absence of these characteristics influence redistributive behaviors. In Chapter **??** I determine who in our country actually believes that economic desert is rewarded, and I uncover our hidden assumptions about who we think deserves what. Then in Chapter **??** I show that individuals' economic policy preferences are largely shaped by (i) their definition of economic desert and (ii) their belief in the reward thereof. If you want to skip ahead and see a summary of what my empirical analyses yield, turn to Chapter **??**, my conclusion, wherein I also offer some ideas for future research on the topic of economic justice. With that, we may begin.

1.1 Data collection.

Chapters **??**–**??** constitute the empirical potion of my dissertation. The analyses in those chapters rely on a large-N survey, survey experiments, and economic experiments. Instances of experiments are chapter-specific. The large-N survey, however, is referenced throughout the dissertation. I present an overview of this survey, its strengths and weaknesses, here rather than reintroduce it every chapter.

I hired SocialSci to administer a survey of my design to 1,000 adult American respondents. SocialSci maintains a participant pool in several countries, and these pools are specifically intended for academic survey research. Their vetting system tracks participant responses over time and across studies, removing participants whose demographics inexplicably fluctuate from the pool.

For completing my survey, which took around 18 minutes on average, respondents were awarded 50 "points" (about $0.83). SocialSci participants can accumulate and then redeem points for Amazon gift cards, or they can donate their earnings to scientific organizations such as the Public Library of Science. Of the 1,000 respondents surveyed, 992 completed the survey within a reasonable timeframe and their responses constitute the primary dataset used in the empirical analyses within this dissertation.

Table 1.1: Demogaphic breakdown of survey sample.

	Sample N	Sample %	US pop %	Sample% − US pop%
Gender				
Female	586	0.59	0.51	0.08
Male	406	0.41	0.49	−0.08
	992	*1.00*	*1.00*	*0.00*
Race				
White	701	0.71	0.64	0.07
Black	93	0.09	0.12	−0.03
Latino	52	0.05	0.16	−0.11
Asian	111	0.11	0.05	0.06
Other	35	0.04	0.03	0.01
	992	*1.00*	*1.00*	*0.00*
Education				
High school or less	118	0.12	0.43	−0.31
Associate's or some college	330	0.33	0.29	0.04
Bachelor's degree	351	0.35	0.17	0.18
Graduate degree	193	0.19	0.11	0.08
	992	*1.00*	*1.00*	*0.00*
Household income				
<$25k	192	0.19	0.25	−0.06
$25k–$49k	247	0.25	0.25	0.00
$50k–$74k	210	0.21	0.18	0.03
$75k–$99k	141	0.14	0.12	0.02
$100k–$149k	137	0.14	0.12	0.02
$150k+	65	0.07	0.08	−0.01
	992	*1.00*	*1.00*	*0.00*
Political party				
Republican	68	0.07	0.24	−0.17
Lean Republican	79	0.08	0.16	−0.08
Independent	264	0.27	0.12	0.15
Lean Democrat	284	0.29	0.16	0.13
Democrat	297	0.30	0.32	−0.02
	992	*1.00*	*1.00*	*0.00*

Initially, SocialSci sampling specialists attempted to recruit respondents such that the 1,000 participants would meet census quotas for gender, education, race, and household income. This proved a cumbersome process, which I abandoned in favor of recruitment from the general pool. The demographic breakdown for the final 992 respondents is shown in Table 1.1. Population totals are also shown to provide a sense of the survey's external validity. The distribution of household income in my sample is remarkably close to the national distribution, a fortuitous outcome given the substantive focus of this dissertation. Females, college graduates, whites, Asians, and political independents are overrepresented. Males, people with only a high school diploma or less, Latinos, and Republicans are underrepresented.

So that the standard errors in my subsequent analyses account for under- and over-recruitment from various sub-populations, I calculate sampling weights using a "raking" weight-calibration process (alternatively known as "iterative proportional fitting" and "sample-balancing").[4] My final weights are based on five stratification dimensions: gender, education, race, household income, and political party identification. The marginal distributions of each dimension in the U.S. population serve as "control totals", toward which sample margins converge over the stepwise process. I show national control totals in the leftmost column of Table 1.1. Estimates of the gender, educational, racial, and income breakdowns in the U.S. population come from the Census Bureau's 2012 projections. Estimates of partisan breakdowns come from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2012).

Embedded in my survey were several survey experiments, to be discussed in the appropriate chapters. Survey respondents were randomly assigned to one conditions within a given experiment, so Table 1.1 shows the pool from which survey experiment participants were drawn. For a more detailed demographic breakdown by experimental condition, please see Appendix **??**. There, you will also find the demographic makeup of subjects from my economic experiments, which were conducted independently of my survey and are detailed in later chapters.

Funding for this survey, the experiments within, and the economic experiments conducted separately was provided by two generous donors: The Vincent and Elinor Ostrom Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis and the Indiana University Social Science Research Commons. I am indebted to the leaders and employees of these organizations and am grateful for their willingness

[4]Specifically, I used STATA 12's `survwgt rake` command.

to support graduate student research.

2 | Desert, Institutions, and the Many Justices

Desert is the quality of meriting some reward or punishment. To call someone deserving identifies the subject as being worthy of a particular treatment. For conceptual ease, I distinguish between two broad categories of economic desert. A person can be targeted for special—although not necessarily enviable—economic consideration as a matter of (i) reward and punishment, or (ii) compensation and reparation (Feldman 1995*b*).[1] Examples of the former: Being royalty in medieval England entitled you to a portion of your subjects' agricultural yields, and being the longer serving employee at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles makes you, in some eyes, deserving of a larger paycheck than your junior colleague. Royalty and seniority are being rewarded. For an example of the latter, imagine two employees identical in every way except sex. Corporate policy may dictate that the employee of the traditionally marginalized sex—the female—be considered for a promotion over her otherwise equal male coworker. Desert in this case is not a celebration of females. Rather, desert here is meant as restitution for a now outmoded norm that celebrated males in the workplace.

From the rather commonplace notion of desert grows the comparatively lofty idea of justice. Justice, many moral philosophers contend, is getting what one deserves (e.g., Feldman 1992, 1995*a*,*c*; Rescher 1966; Sidgwick 1962). John Stuart Mill (1957, 55) formulates the position forcefully: "[I]t is universally considered just that each person should obtain that (whether good or evil) which he *deserves* [...]." "What could be simpler?" queries Hospers (1961, 433). Not much, apparently, for many thinkers reject the view as too simple, although these philosophers also acknowledge the

[1] Compensation and reparation are often treated as interchangeable, but there exists a crucial difference. "[W]hereas the latter is due only after injustice the former may be due when no one has acted unjustly to anyone else" (Boxill 1979, 257–258; Khatchadourian 2006). Consider two people unable to walk, the first as a result of congenital illness, the second a result of collision with a drunk driver. Members of the community agree that both people are due financial amelioration. But where fall the duties of repair? Congenital illness and other acts of God cannot be attributed to any earthy actor, and since He is unlikely to write a check, disability compensation will probably be paid by a sympathetic community. The drunk driver, conversely, can be reasonably identified as owing reparations to the victim of her negligence.

patent link between desert and justice (Feinberg 1963; Lucas 1980; Sher 1987; Slote 1973).

Moral notions like desert and justice are as potent as they are because they derive not from formal contemplation, but from actual human interaction, as I explain in length later in this chapter. We must learn what it means to different people to be deserving of different goods and treatments in different situations. Most of the language surrounding topics like social, economic, and organizational justice, however, is heavy with semantic baggage. This is true not only in normative treatments of justice common in philosophy and economics, but also in descriptive treatments from sociology, psychology, and organizational theory. Some terms are unnecessarily stringent, failing to account for their everyday use. For example, several academics implicitly equate deservingness with personal control and causation (e.g., Jost and Kay 2010; Nisbett and Ross 1980), but these properties are by no means mandatory components of desert. Other terms are used too loosely. Organizational and social psychologists, for example, tend to use "fairness" and "justice" interchangeably (Greenberg 2011), whereas other thinkers posit fairness as a component of justice (e.g., Feinberg 1974).

Before getting to the empirical core of this dissertation, we must first settle on basic constructions of desert and its attending concepts. To do that we must review select areas of past research into justice, which I do in the following section of this chapter. After that, I show that many of the otherwise disparate conceptualizations of justice can be more accurately and parsimoniously restated in terms of desert. To conclude, I translate my argument into the grammar of social institutions, which ties my research directly to the institutional economics literature and provides a theoretical account for why definitions and assessments of economic desert will influence people's behavior and policy preferences.

2.1 Justice as distribution and procedure.

The literature on justice, were such a body to exist in any formal sense, is immense. It spans centuries and disciplines, has been tackled from consequential (e.g., Bentham 1843; Mill 1957) and deontological perspectives (e.g., Kant 1993; Rawls 1971). Attempts to engender justice can be proactive or reactive (Greenberg and Wiethoff 2001), and they play out daily in settings formal and informal (Frankena 1962), over goods tangible and intangible (Foa and Foa 1974).

To help make sense of so broad a field, scholars have taken to classifying types of justice. "Retributive justice" deals with the punishment of intentional moral transgressions (e.g., Carlsmith and Darley 2008), whereas "restorative justice" looks specifically at the process of punishment as carried out by victims as opposed to a third party (e.g., Wenzel et al. 2008). "Interpersonal justice" involves the degree to which we treat others with dignity, "informational justice" deals with our explanations to one another regarding procedures and outcomes, and both of these justices are classed under the more general "interactional justice" (e.g., Greenberg 1993; Loi, Yang and Diefendorff 2009). The list goes on.[2]

Desert as I use it accounts for the gamut of justice types. Given my focus on large-scale social machinations and the apportionment of economic resources, two conceptions of justice warrant extended analysis. "Distributive justice" is concerned with the allocation of resources, and "procedural justice" is concerned with the rules that lead to those allocations. In the course of introducing these two varieties of justice, we will become familiar with the basic terms and concepts needed to fully understand desert and the promise it holds for explaining contemporary economic inequality and our responses to it.

2.1.1 Distributive justice.

Among whom and on what grounds might a good be allocated? Three general distribution schemes, each ancient in their pedigree, have received the bulk of academic attention: need, equality, and equity. The first is perhaps best exemplified in the writings of Karl Marx (2008, 27), who identified "to each according to their needs" an appropriate principle of distribution. A just distribution under a needs-based scheme requires that individuals be guaranteed some minimum allocation of a given resource.[3]

Whereas the need principle necessitates establishing a floor below which an individual's allot-

[2]Greenberg (2011) and Jost and Kay (2010) provide comprehensive yet approachable reviews of research into organizational and social justice, in there many forms, and both were invaluable in composing this literature review.

[3]That Marx is so closely associated with the need-based conception of distributive justice is something of a historical irony. Marx, although genuinely outraged at the exploitation of workers, saw little practical value in appealing to people's sense of justice (Campbell 2001; Husami 1978; Tucker 1970; Wood 1972). Moreover, he was fearful that competing notions of justice might be used to further entrench the status quo, and was consequently cautious in his normative appeals. He instead advanced overthrow of the capitalist system as a matter of collective self-interest (e.g., "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working Men of All Countries, Unite!" (Marx and Engles 2012, 102)) and largely confined his work to historical analysis (Jost and Kay 2010).

ment of a resource may not fall, the *equality* principle is preoccupied with both resource ceilings and floors. Marx's call for a classless society was interpreted by many as a call for strict egalitarianism with regard to economic outcomes (Campbell 2001). A just distribution of a specified resource under an equality-based scheme is one in which every individual has an equal amount of that resource, no more or less.

The *equity* principle grounds distributional justice in a different sort of equality. Rather than ensuring an equality of outcomes across individuals, equity-based schemes insist on—as Aristotle (1999, 71) put it—"treating equals as equals" (Feinberg 1973; Frankena 1962; Mansbridge 2005). The goal here is "proportionality" (Vlastos 1997) between an individual's inputs and outcomes, her merit and reward. A distribution is just when individual inputs are balanced by the outcomes they yield such that the more meritorious the individual, the greater her reward.

From Aristotle's (1999, 71) call for an "equality of ratios", psychologists developed the modern *equity theory* (e.g., Adams 1963, 1965; Austin and Walster 1974; Blau 1968; Homans 1961; Walster, Walster and Berscheid 1978). People want, the theory holds, to maintain a proportional relationship between the inputs they invest (say, hours of study or effort at work) and the outcomes they receive (say, test score or salary). Comparisons to one's prior experiences (Adams 1965) or actors in similar situations (Festinger 1954) enable people to assess the degree to which proportionality is achieved. A failure to maintain the requisite proportionality produces psychological distress, which stimulates the afflicted to restore equity (Walster, Berscheid and William 1973). Crucially, this distress is predicted to occur whether an individual's disproportionate return is personally favorable or unfavorable.[4] Crucially, this distress is predicted to occur whether an individual's disproportionate return is personally favorable or unfavorable.[5] And inequity need not be directed at the self to induce distress: observing it in other relationships can yield the same effects. On the whole, empirical evaluations have "supported the basic tenets of equity theory to an impressive

[4]The means by which equity is restored is not always as wholesome or demonstrable as might be desired. Sometimes the offended individual will increase or decrease her input so as to match her outcome (Sturman and Thibodeau 2001). Sometimes she will endeavor to make her outcome match her input, voluntarily donating excess payoffs or taking additional payoffs to which she feels entitled (Greenberg 1990). Other times, the repair is a purely psychological affair, with the subject of inequity working to rationalize the situation, convincing herself that equity has in fact been realized (Hatfield and Sprecher 1984).

[5]A person being overpaid for a task, for example, is not expected to construe her situation as super-extra-just. According to equity theory she will recognize the discrepancy between her inputs and their outcome. Emotionally, this would manifest as guilt. Receiving fewer benefits than one's inputs warrant, conversely, produces ire (Hegtvedt 1990; Homans 1961; Jost, Wakslak and Tyler 2008; Schmitt et al. 2000).

degree" (Jost and Kay 2010, 1130; Ambrose and Kulik 1999).

Each of the three general distribution schemes suffers from ambiguity in their prescriptions. What exactly constitutes "need" will vary according to the resource in question and across time and cultures. Similarly, the equality principle does not specify what resources should be distributed equally and which might be defensibly stratified in their apportionment. And what characteristics, attributes, or inputs actually constitute merit has been a source of contention since before Aristotle codified it as a principle of justice.[6]

In spite of this ambiguity, there exists ample evidence that people demand distributive justice, though which kind is a complicated matter. People seem to value each of the three distribution principles (Cohen and Greenberg 1982; Mikula 1984; Reis 1984), understanding that they vary in their suitability with situation and disposition (Barrett-Howard and Tyler 1986; Bolino and Turnley 2008; Clark and Mills 1979; Deutsch 1975, 1985; Lerner and Whitehead 1980; Lerner 1974; Reis 1984; Tornblom and Foa 1983). For example, people tend to prefer equal and need-based distributions when dealing with close relations and those they perceive as similar to themselves (Greenberg 1978, 1983; Jasso and Rossi 1977; Lamm and Schwinger 1980; Lerner 1974; Sondak, Neale and Pinkley 1995, 1999), whereas equity is usually the favorite distribution principle in formal interactions (Deutsch 1975, 1985; Greenberg and Cohen 1982). Indeed, the manner in which resources are distributed is often interpreted by involved parties as revealing the nature of their relationship (Greenberg 1983).

It is not entirely clear, however, the extent to which instrumental concerns dictate a person's preference for one or another principle (Montada 2003). For example, family members' consistent predilection for divvying resources according to the equality and need principles may be as much a matter of morality as a desire to ensure cordial dealings among people who can expect frequent future interactions (Deutsch 1975; Konow 2003; Shapiro 1975; Wenzel 2000). Moreover, peoples' *ex ante* distributional preferences do not always accord with their *post hoc* rationalizations of actual distributions (Diekmann et al. 1997). To illustrate: When asked to assign applicants to jobs, experimental subjects redefined merit so as to align with the idiosyncratic credentials of their

[6] Aristotle (2002, 162) was keenly aware of the difficulties in achieving consensus on the definition of merit: "[E]verybody agrees that what is just in distributions must accord with some kind of merit, but everybody is not talking about the same kind of merit: for democrats merit lies in being born a free person, for oligarchs in wealth or, for some of them, in noble descent, for aristocrats in excellence."

favored applicants (Uhlmann and Cohen 2005). In sum, the resource allocation for which people lobby reveals some amalgam of their concerns for justice and self-interest (Jost and Azzi 1996; Konow 2003; Mikula 1984).

2.1.2 Procedural justice.

Outcomes are but one clue by which people ascertain a situation's justness. The distribution of a resource, after all, is the result of some process, and that process is as open to scrutiny as the product it bears. Over the past quarter century, investigations into procedural justice have outpaced research into the many other expressions of justice (Jost and Kay 2010). In spite of this upsurge in thinking on the topic, two conceptualizations of procedural justice continue to dominate the academic literature: process control (Thibaut and Walker 1975) and procedural rules (Leventhal 1980).

Affected parties might hope to exercise control over a decision-making process either before a decision is made or as a decision is rendered (Ambrose and Arnaud 2005; Brockner and Wiesenfeld 1996; Walker, Lind and Thibaut 1979). The former is called "process control" and exists to some degree if affected parties are allowed to present their cases to a third-party arbiter. The latter is called "decision control" and exists when the affected parties have some say in the final adjudication. In their comparison of adversarial and inquisitorial judicial systems, Thibaut and Walker (1975) proposed that litigants would trust the legal process to be fair when they perceived themselves to wield both types of control. Surprising, then, to find that people often labeled as fairest those procedures in which they had no hand in decision-making but ample opportunity to express their concerns. The importance of "voice"—the capacity to influence outcomes, but not determine them—extends beyond the realm of jurisprudence, and subsequent research has lent special support to the role of process control in justice appraisals generally (e.g., van den Bos 2005; Dipboye and de Pontbriand 1981; Folger 1977; Houlden et al. 1978; Landy, Barnes-Farrell and Cleveland 1980; Lind and Kulik 2009; Lind and Tyler 1988).

While recognizing the importance of voice, Leventhal (1980) sought to extend the applicability of procedural justice beyond dispute resolution by proposing six rules that together make a process fair. According to Leventhal, procedures should: be applied consistently across people and time ("consistency"); (disregard personal interests and preconceptions ("bias suppression"); operate on

valid information ("accuracy"); allow for the modification or reversal of previous decisions ("correctability"); reflect the values of the people whom they affect ("representativeness"); and align with the moral tenets of the people involved ("ethicality"). As was true of distributional principles, the importance of these procedural rules to justice appraisals varies with situation (Barrett-Howard and Tyler 1986). Of the six, however, people appear to stress three—consistency, accuracy, and ethicality—in in a range of circumstances (Barrett-Howard and Tyler 1986; Lind and Tyler 1988).

The fact that people are often preoccupied with the *fairness* of an outcome over the *favorability* of that outcome to their personal circumstance suggests to some researchers that procedural justice is not a matter of simple self-interest (van den Bos 2005). Others believe that calls for fair procedures may be subtle demonstrations of self-interest (e.g., Folger et al. 1979; Shapiro and Brett 2005; Tyler 1994), given people's inclination to read their position in a debate as reasonable and counter-positions as misguided (Ross and Ward 1996). Beyond material gain, people may care about procedural justice because of what procedures imply about their position within a group (Lind and Tyler 1988; Tyler and Lind 1992; Tyler 1994), which in turn affects their feelings of self-worth (Tajfel and Turner 2004). From their procedural treatment, people infer the respect superiors have for them and the trust superiors have in them, and they gauge their standing among and value to group members (Heuer et al. 1999; Huo 2002; Smith et al. 1998; Tyler, Degoey and Smith 1996; Tyler 1994). Unjust treatment—failing to afford someone voice and the range of rules that together make a procedure fair—communicates a lack of full belonging (Baumeister and Leary 1995).

People may be less attentive to, or outright ignore, procedural concerns when they hold "moral mandates": strongly held feelings about specific issues, commonly coupled with hostility towards apparent transgressors (Mullen and Skitka 2006; Skitka, Bauman and Sargis 2005). Researchers disagree as to the extent moral mandates influence procedural concerns. One line of inquiry finds that, given a sufficiently ingrained mandate, people are undisturbed by unfair processes so long as outcomes accord with moral conviction; and processes that are otherwise on the up-and-up do not diminish the perceived wrong engendered by a mandate's violation (Skitka and Houston 2001; Skitka and Mullen 2002; Skitka 2002). Others, however, find that unsavory outcomes can be made more palatable when people—even those with robust moral convictions regarding disputatious issues—are convinced the outcome was generated justly (Gibson 2008; Napier and Tyler 2008;

Tyler and Mitchell 1994).

2.2 Unifying the different justices.

Justice appraisals appear to be driven by perceptions of distributive and procedural fairness (Tyler and Smith 1998), and the two interact to shape a person's response to outcomes both favorable and unfavorable (Brockner and Wiesenfeld 1996; Brockner et al. 2003). Still, researchers have endeavored to measure the independent influence of distributive and procedural justice (and a host of other notions of justice, such as interpersonal and informational justice) on a variety of dependent variables, including: job performance (e.g., Donnerstein 1991; Gilliland 1994; Greenberg 1986), job and pay satisfaction (e.g., Folger and Konovsky 1989; Greenberg 1982; Mowday and Colwell 2003), trust in leaders (e.g., Alexander and Ruderman 1987; Tyler and Caine 1981), and organizational commitment (e.g., Folger and Konovsky 1989; Sweeney and McFarlin 1993), among many others. For the most part, researchers have been successful in gauging the relative importance of the different forms of justice to their outcome of interest.[7]

But I argue that the two predominant notions of justice are more intimately related than researchers usually acknowledge. This entanglement, which I describe below, is especially problematic for the kind of broad justice appraisals with which this study is concerned. A handful of scholars question the conceptual distinctions commonly drawn by their colleagues, wondering if we might be better served by focusing on perceptions of "overall justice" (e.g., Ambrose and Arnaud 2005). Their efforts to do so, however, continue to rely on assessing the types of justice independently. I propose unifying distributional and procedural (and most other kinds of) justice by introducing the concept of desert.

2.2.1 The elements of desert.

Recipes for desert have three basic ingredients: (i) a deserving *subject*, (ii) a deserved *object*, and (iii) a desert *basis* (McLeod 2013).[8] The first two elements are apparent in their meaning, and translate

[7] See Colquitt et al. (2001) for a meta-analytic review of the relative importance of different forms of justice to different dependent variables.

[8] Kleinig (1971) proposes a fourth ingredient: a source from which the subject deserves the object. McLeod (2013), however, raises two objections to this addition. The first is that valid instances of desert may contain so overly-general, indefinite a source as to render its inclusion purposeless. I say that the pitiable Gregor Samsa, by virtue of his streak of rotten luck, deserves some good luck. Whence is this good luck to originate? Second, other instances of desert

into everyday language as "S deserves O". A desert basis, the third element, communicates why the subject deserves the object. It is a fact about the people who are or are not deserving of a given treatment or good (Feinberg 1970). Including it in our formula, we have "S deserves O because of B." Two examples, one from the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences and the other from Dante's *Divine Comedy*:

- Elinor Ostrom (S) deserves the Nobel Prize (O) for her pioneering analysis of economic governance (B);
- As punishment for using treachery to win the Trojan War (B), Ulysses (S) deserves to be engulfed in eternal flame (O).

Elinor is not alone in deserving economics' highest accolade, nor is Ulysses the only soul fit to burn. Future scholars will be deemed worthy of the Nobel, and fire awaits other counselors of fraud in Dante's hell. For more general desert expressions, deserving subjects may be implied by the stated desert basis or bases, negating the need to identify them specifically. To illustrate: Anybody who is B_1 and B_2 deserves O. The subject (S) here would be all people who meet both bases (B_1 and B_2).

Although I have not earlier used the traditional language of desert, we have already seen its constituent parts nascent in earlier sections. Distributional principles establish a desert formulary, indicating what bases warrant what objects. And procedural justice rules are meant to accurately ration deserved objects, getting them to the appropriate subjects. The relationship between desert and these different justices will be address in turn.

2.2.2 Desert and distributive justice.

Distributional principles hint at who ought to get however much of whatever good (or treatment or punishment), and why. In short, they allude to desert. Even in their most general specification the three distributional principles speak to our three ingredients, suggesting why someone deserves the good under consideration, and indicating roughly how much of that good they should be given.

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embed a source within the deserved object (that being the second of the three standard desert ingredients). For their hard-rocking and technically-proficient performance, Def Leppard deserves applause—applause, we can safely assume, from the audience.

Under the need principle, an individual is entitled to a share of good x by virtue of possessing an insufficient amount of that good, and she is to receive x at least until her need of that good is satisfied. Under equality, an individual is entitled to a share of good x by virtue of being a member of some group—a group defined by possessing some specified constellation of attributes—and she is to receive or donate good x until she has as much as, and no more than, other members of her group. Under equity, an individual is entitled to receive a share of good x by virtue of her input to some endeavor, and she is to receive about as much x as others who contributed equally to that endeavor, more x than others who contributed less, and less x than others who contributed more.

Operationalizing a distributional principle—actually putting it into practice—requires a great deal more specificity than the three distribution schemes offer in their general forms. It requires articulating deserved objects and desert bases. For example, in line with the need principle, you may equate desert of sustenance with a current lack of it. Not having enough food is what makes a person deserving of more. But a lack of food relative to what? Having enough food to prevent starvation is different than having the quantity and diversity of foodstuffs to meet medical dietary standards. Managers of a food stamp program will find that a great many more people are deserving of assistance if they adopt the latter understanding of food needs. In full, the basis for deserving more food here is not having the amount required to achieve a specified medical authority's nutritional standards.

Subjects, objects, and bases of desert can be specified for the other distribution principles. For equality, think of the suffrage call for "one person one vote" in democratic elections. Promoters of universal suffrage would argue that a nation's adult citizens, by virtue of their citizenship and adulthood, deserve a say in national elections equal to that enjoyed by their fellow adult citizens. Universal male suffrage, conversely, endorses a more limited basis of desert—one *man* one vote—but stipulates the same equal dispersion of the good among qualifiers (namely adult, male citizens). An example in the opposite direction: Proponents of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights believe that all people are undeserving of torture (i.e., deserve an equal amount of torture, that amount being none) by virtue of being human beings (UN General Assembly 1948, Article V). Some people believe the basis of desert for this equal distribution lies not in being human but in an organism's self-awareness or capacity to feel pain. Members of this club include great apes, who would therefore also deserve freedom from torture (e.g., Singer 1986). Both versions follow the

equality principle, but differ in their desert bases.

For equity, remember back to your school days. There are better and worse outcomes, marks ranging from 'A' to 'F', and those marks are assigned according to various inputs. Bases for desert in this scenario—the inputs that map onto academic outcomes—could be the number of hours a student spent studying, or the number of questions correctly answered on an exam. Dedicated but academically-challenged students have an interest in the former basis, just as lethargic but gifted students would prefer to see the latter. Desert for educators, however, may lie in a student's effort and scholastic performance, such that grades will incorporate both bases. As with preferences for one or another distributional principle, the exact bases of desert in the aforementioned scenarios will shift with individual incentives as well as with personal and cultural understandings of the good being distributed.

As illustrated in the above examples, distributional principles—while a useful shorthand—can be more accurately rephrased in the language of desert. Doing so is not difficult, and it stands to eliminate illusory divisions between the major distributional principles. I initially used universal suffrage as an example of the equality principle, but it could just as easily illustrate the equity principle. The bases for a vote are adulthood and citizenship. People who are adults and citizens to an equal degree get an equal vote. It just so happens that both adulthood and citizenship are binary categories, so the equitable distribution among adult nationals is also an equal distribution among adult nationals. Indeed, Reis (1984, 39) points out that what may appear an inclination towards the equality principle may actually be an exercise of equity wherein "the scrutineer perceive[s] the relevant inputs to be equal." Equality and need can also be easily conflated. You can distribute 2000 calories of food to all adult males every day as a matter of equality, or as a matter of need, 2000 calories being about what an adult male human needs to function. Specifying deserved objects, deserving subjects, and desert bases communicates the same information *and more* as specifying the distributional principle, at little cost to the researcher.

I go further, though. Not only does desert allow us to collapse the three distributional principles into a single concept; it also allows us to combine distributive and procedural notions of justice.

2.2.3 Desert and procedural justice.

Establishing who deserves what—defining the subject, object, and bases of desert—is an essential first step in achieving justice, but at some point we are concerned with whether people actually get what they deserve. Enter procedure. Procedures have some end, possibly myriad ends, toward which they are functioning. If we are interested in justice, then the goal against which we judge the success of a procedure is whether or not it delivers to people under its jurisdiction that which they deserve. In the traditional terminology of desert, procedures are meant to convey a deserved object to a deserving subject by virtue of that subject meeting desert bases. A person may claim to be in need of good x, and others who equate need of x with desert of x will want a procedure that delivers sufficient x to the claimant only if she is truly in need of it. Whatever other ends that procedure might be satisfying, it is failing from our perspective if it allocates x to someone not in need of it, or withholds x from someone in need of it.

Procedures, in this view, lend credence to or discredit a person's claim to desert. But there are two opportunities for procedural error: (i) identification and (ii) delivery. A procedure may incorrectly identify someone as deserving or undeserving, and/or it may deliver more or less of a good than is deserved. In the first scenario, a procedure has erroneously associated a subject and a desert basis. In the second, a procedure has imperfectly conferred to a subject the proper object. Lacking a God's-eye view, we cannot hope to truly know whether desert bases are satisfied. We rely on our procedures—imperfect as they are—to ensure that people get the share of the good they deserve. Employees at a small firm may be confident appraising whether co-workers get the salaries they deserve, but at larger scales we are increasingly dependent on our knowledge of procedure to judge a distribution's justness. Fair procedures, we hope, lead to just distributions. In this way, our knowledge of procedures may serve as heuristics (van den Bos and Lind 2002; van den Bos et al. 1997; Van den Bos et al. 1998); mental shortcuts that help us answer the more demanding question of whether we believe desert has been rewarded.

As an example of potential difficulties that await procedures meant to identify and reward desert, consider the following desert formula: Loyal employees (B, S) deserve higher salaries than employees with less loyalty (O). Deserving subjects in this instance are relatively loyal employees, and they are deserving by virtue of their loyalty. Acting on such statements can be tricky. It

is no easy thing to determine an employee's allegiance to a firm let alone gauge it against the fidelity of their co-workers. As such, a manager might try to approximate loyalty with some metric: Because of their loyalty (B), longer-serving employees (S) deserve higher salaries than employees with fewer years of service (O). Although more easily implemented than the initial formula, this new prescription conflates years of service with company loyalty. The two may be synonymous in some cases, but not all.

Failing to meet a desert basis *negates* your deservingness; failing to follow proper procedures in determining distributional criteria *calls into question* your deservingness. Disentangling the two is a precarious business for we are rarely if ever privy to full information about an individual's deservingness, the functioning of a procedure meant to determine that deservingness, or the success of a procedure in delivering the entitled distribution. People can argue over the appropriate desert bases and over the outcomes to which the deserving are entitled, and they can dispute proper functioning of the procedures meant to ensure deserved outcomes. Leventhal's (1980) rules give us a manageable catalogue of factors that make a procedure palatable. Desert bases and the distribution schemes to which they are linked, however, stand to vary across individuals and cultures. Determining what an individual construes as desert in any given context is no small task.

2.3 What is deserved?

Proceeding under the naturalist interpretation—the premise that the moral rules governing our behavior are largely shaped by evolutionary forces, biological and social (Aristotle 1999; Binmore 1994, 1998, 2011; Hobbes 2008; Hume 2011; Mackie 1977; Skyrms 1996)—desert becomes damnably complex. If repeated human interactions shape an individual's and society's definition of justice, then what counts as deserved should vary widely with context and culture (Binmore 2011; Skyrms 1996). And that is exactly what we see (Elster 1992; Westermarck 1906; Young 1995). Add to this already intricate arrangement the psychological dimension of moral concepts (e.g., Graham, Haidt and Nosek 2009; Haidt and Joseph 2004), and the host of factors political and biographical that lead people to hold different avenues to economic success or failure in varying levels of esteem (e.g., Schneider and Ingram 1993), and we can reasonably expect a fair amount of variation in the definition of economic desert among individuals.

People travel in multiple, overlapping social groups. Definitions of justice may have evolved differently in each, and desert, as an emergent property, will similarly vary. For example, Calvinism and modern offshoots label all economic outcomes as God-ordained and therefore deserved, whereas other Protestant camps demand an incredible work ethic of believers. Adherents to the so-called Protestant work ethic tend to express little sympathy for the less well-to-do (Furnham 1982, 1983; MacDonald 1972), essentially equating desert with industriousness. And then there are professions, which could conceivably have their own norms. Computer programmers may see less value in logging long hours writing hundreds of lines of code and instead extol strokes of brilliance that lead to code that is simple, elegant. Desert for them would lie more in cunning than labor. What is a Protestant programmer to do? And then there are individual incentives that can influence people's notions of economic justice. People with large families and many dependents could reasonably want economic desert to accord with need. And people who fall into traditionally disadvantaged groups, such as women and non-whites, might want to vastly expand the definition of economic desert and equate economic justice with equal distribution of wealth. The possibilities are legion.

There are a few large-N surveys from which we can begin to determine the effects different ideological and demographic variables have on the likelihood that an individual will subscribe to any of a handful of the possible definitions of economic desert. The most useful surveys include the 2009 General Social Survey (GSS), the 2011 Pew Economic Mobility Survey, and the multi-year, multi-nation International Social Survey Programme's (ISSP) social inequality modules. Questions from these surveys allow us to measure how deserving certain people consider others of specific economic treatment based on their educational background, intelligence, ambition, social and professional connections, willingness to work hard, and their parent's connections and wealth. While an interesting foray into the concept, analysis of popular support for specific desert criteria may lull us into believing that we have accounted for all possible manifestations.

A more fruitful approach to understanding economic desert as it is understood by Americans is to investigate key dimensions underlying the notion. I propose to look at two such dimensions. The first is agency: Must people exercise control over—must they be personally responsible for—meeting or failing to meet desert bases, whatever those bases may be? The second is proportionality: Is it enough to guarantee some minimum reward or punishment for meeting a deservingness threshold, or must payoffs be proportional to desert, differentiating between increasingly fine degrees of merit?

These two concepts are fundamental to philosophical treatments of desert. Though the source of philosophical debate, both been used rather definitively by social scientists, who seem inclined to assume that desert is: (i) intimately tied to bases over which people exhibit control rather than those for which we are not (or do not appear) responsible; and (ii) confined to distributions based on equity rather than need or equality. As a matter of both philosophy and empirics, neither need be the case. I touch on both topics here, but I will return to them at length in Chapters **??** and **??**, wherein I use a large-N survey and a series of survey and economic experiments to measure the importance of each to American conceptions of economic desert.

2.3.1 Desert and agency.

For many thinkers, deservingness presupposes responsibility, lying only in those attributes and behaviors for which a person can claim credit (Pojman 1997; Rachels 1978; Rawls 1971). Divvying a resource along desert bases outside an individual's control would, accordingly, be unjust. This conflation of desert and personal responsibility has carried over into the social sciences with important empirical results: People are relatively comfortable discriminating against others when the grounds for that discrimination are qualities supposedly within our personal jurisdiction (Crandall and Martinez 1996; Puhl and Brownell 2003; Quinn and Crocker 1999); and people tend to view as more just those social, economic, and political systems that distribute resources on similar grounds (Jost et al. 2003). But by tacitly associating deservingness with personal causation, as social psychologists often do (see Jost and Kay 2010), we lose sight of a great many desert bases over which people hold no sway.

People can reasonably debate whether a person exercises control over a given quality, but some folks will endorse an economic desert base knowing full well that we have no control over it. There are plenty of situations wherein desert and responsibility have little overlap (Cupit 1996, 1999; Feldman 1995*a*, 1996). Showing that myriad factors external to the student drive the extent and quality of her schooling will convince some that formal education is not a sound moral basis for distributing economic standing. Others will be unmoved. For them, individual agency over a trait is irrelevant to its standing as a basis for desert. Race, sex, parentage: We need not get overly creative in our search for bases of economic desert that leave no room for responsibility, nor need we look too far in history to see their effects. Moreover, not all desert bases outside our control are

opportunistic in their relations with justice. A bystander unwittingly caught in and injured during a calamity might be recognized as due financial compensation for her suffering. Indeed, it is in part her lack of responsibility—her innocence—that makes her deserving of compensation.

2.3.2 Desert and proportionality.

This dissertation focuses on the distribution of wealth and economic standing and, as mentioned earlier, Deutsch (1975) and Lerner (1974) make a compelling case that, when people feel "both dependent on and nonequivalent to other social actors, as in marketplace environments" (Jost and Kay 2010, 1132), they are disposed to prefer distributions based on the equity principle rather than the need or equality principles. The desert bases according to which economic reward is proportionally distributed under equity schemes are often utilitarian in nature; merit, that is, lies in productive activities or qualities by which society as a whole might benefit (Frankena 1962; Hayek 2012; Nozick 2013).

Just as I am reluctant to limit possible economic desert bases to those over which individuals enjoy agency, so am I hesitant to assume that people demand proportional distribution of economic goods, or want that proportional distribution confined to market-relevant definitions of desert. For some people—often called "egalitarians"—equality of economic *opportunity* is insufficient; they are "concerned with people's *being equally well off*" (Parfit 1997, 204; Williams 2000). Need, too, is a perfectly defensible quality on which to seat economic desert. People of this persuasion are not so bothered that some have more than others, but by the fact that some do not have enough to meet their needs (Frankfurt 1987). This suggests that proportional distribution of economic standing and wealth might be tolerable to some egalitarians so long as stratification occurs above a minimum threshold.

2.4 Desert and the grammar of institutions.

Fair procedures and distribution principles, equity and proportionality, desert bases, objects, and subjects: It is all getting a bit complicated. To conclude this chapter, I will attempt to restate my argument in a way that clarifies my theory and unites the many concepts relevant to it. To do so, I must invoke the grammar of institutions.

Social institutions have been studied from three dominant perspectives: institutions as equilibria (or, with slight refocusing, as shared strategies), institutions as norms, and institutions as rules. Rather than loose themselves in this debate, Crawford and Ostrom (1995, 583) note that these approaches are not mutually exclusive and permit all three conceptualizations under their notion of an *institutional statement*: "a shared linguistic constraint or opportunity that prescribes, permits, or advises actions or outcomes for actors." Desert statements, I contend, can be meaningfully read as institutional statements, and as institutional statements notions of desert come with behavioral obligations. Individual understandings of economic desert, that is, will have real implications for the growth and persistence of economic inequality.

Institutional statements may have up to five components, although the most basic—*shared strategies*—have only three: attributes, aims, and conditions. Attributes detail the subset of a given group for whom the statement applies. Aims are the particular actions or outcomes for which the statement is advocating.[9] And conditions define when, where, and how the statement applies.[10] An example of a shared strategy: "The person who places a phone call calls back when the call gets disconnected" (Crawford and Ostrom 1995, 584; Ostrom 2005). People at large constitute the group and callers the subgroup, as identified by the statement's attributes section. The aim is calling back, and the conditions under which to do so are when a call is dropped. The statement generates an expectation on the part of caller and called that may lead to a behavioral pattern (Ghorbani et al. 2012), but here is no obligation for the caller to reattempt a dropped call, nor is the party initially called prohibited from reattempting the call.

People adhere to shared strategies out of prudence, but desert statements are moral in nature and suggest normative obligations. An element is missing from our institutional translation! We need a *deontic*. Deontics specify an acto's duty, establishing whether the statement is prescriptive or non-prescriptive through use of deontic operators. The actions or outcomes in an institutional statement (i.e., the "aim") can be permitted, obliged, or forbidden. Appending this fourth component of an institutional statement to the first three moves us from the realm of shared strategies to

[9] There are two stipulations on what makes for an acceptable aim in an institutional statement: It and its negation must be psychically possible (Crawford and Ostrom 1995; von Wright 1963). People operating under the statement must be able to take the specified action or secure the specified outcome, and they must be able to avoid those actions or outcomes.

[10] If attributes and conditions are not explicitly stated, then the statement applies to all members of a group in all situations.

norms. Norms do not direct us toward prudent aims, but to proper aims.

2.4.1 Translating desert statements into norms.

Let us return to some desert statements and see how they might be translated into the institutional language of norms. Desert statements (DS_i) will be presented first, followed by corresponding institutional statements (IS_i). For ease of interpretation we will limit ourselves to three common-language deontic operators—*may*, *must*, *must not*—and all institutional statements will follow this syntax: "group [attributes] [deontic] [aim] [conditions]." Desert bases and subjects will be apparent in the group and attribute sections of the institutional statement, and deserved objects in the aim. To start:

- ▸ **DS_1** People (B, S) deserve enough money to cover basic needs (O).
- ▹ **IS_1** People [ ] [must] [possess enough money to cover basic needs] [ ].

These statements hold that all people, by virtue of being human, are entitled to an income able to afford their daily necessities, regardless of context. If any person anywhere is unable to meet their basic needs, desert is unrewarded and an injustice exists. Many will find this sentiment overly generous and will stipulate additional desert bases, which present themselves as attributes. For example:

- ▸ **DS_2** People who labor (B_1, B_2, S) deserve at least enough money to cover basic needs (O).
- ▹ **IS_{2a}** People [labor] [must] [possess enough money to cover basic needs] [ ].
- ▹ **IS_{2b}** People [labor] [may] [possess more than enough money to cover basic needs] [in peacetime].

According to DS_2, income entitlements exist only for people who exert themselves in productive activity. IS_{2a} secures that guarantee. DS2 also enables laborers, by virtue of their toil, to acquire more money than they strictly need, which we signify in IS_{2b} with the deontic "may". Note that I have added to IS_{2b} a condition not included in the initial statement of desert, one that prohibits

surplus resources from accruing to laborers during wartime. Such conditions are not counted among the three classic ingredients of desert. Desert statements, it is presumed, are uttered only in contexts to which they apply. In times of war, then, DS_2 would not contain the words "at least". Or you could take the commonsense step of added the words "during peacetime" to the beginning or end of DS_2. Conversely, individuals who subscribe to DS_2 universally, without regard for contextual factors, will leave the [conditions] section of IS_{2b} empty.

Small but vital discrepancies in desert statements become much more apparent when translated into institutional statements. Consider:

- ▸ **DS_3** People who labor exceptionally hard (B_1, B_2, S) deserve fantastic wealth (O).
- ▹ **IS_{3a}** People [labor exceptionally hard] [must] [possess fantastic wealth] [ ].
- ▹ **IS_{3b}** People [do not labor exceptionally hard] [may] [possess fantastic wealth] [ ].

- ▸ **DS_4** Only people who labor exceptionally hard (B_1, B_2, S) deserve fantastic wealth (O).
- ▹ **IS_{4a}** People [labor exceptionally hard] [must] [possess fantastic wealth] [ ].
- ▹ **IS_{4b}** People [do not labor exceptionally hard] [must not] [possess fantastic wealth] [ ].

One word differentiates DS_3 from DS_4, but with important moral and behavioral consequences. Both hold that hard work should be rewarded with correspondingly substantial wealth: IS_{3a} and IS_{4a} echo this guarantee and are exactly the same. But where DS_3 is silent on other potential avenues to fantastic wealth, DS_4 permits but a single route. IS_{3b} and IS_{4b}, accordingly, are incompatible. Under the latter, people might achieve fortune through hard work alone.[11]

2.4.2 Behavioral implications.

People operating under the guidance of desert and institutional statements may not be able to fully or easily articulate them; indeed, these statements are likely developed through habituation, a part of the "tacit knowledge of a community" (Crawford and Ostrom 1995, 583). But that desert

[11] Please see Appendix **??** for additional information on how to translate desert statements into institutional statements.

statements can be translated into the institutional language of norms has important behavioral implications. When a deontic exists—when certain conduct or outcomes are prescribed as normatively proper or improper—repercussions exist. Motivations to adhere to a norm have gone by many names over the years (e.g., Coleman 1987; Kerr et al. 1997), but they are now referred to as "delta parameters" (Crawford and Ostrom 1995; Ostrom 2005). Delta parameters denote the importance of a norm to an individual and her community; they represent the benefits to heeding and the costs to violating a deontic. These benefits and costs originate from sources both internal and external to the person experiencing them.

Internal delta parameters are essentially our emotional reactions to obeying or disobeying a norm (Crawford and Ostrom 1995; Ostrom 2005). By including a deontic, norms do more than classify a given aim as well or poorly suited to a given situation: They classify aims as right or wrong. It is one thing to act foolishly, quite another to act immorally. Violating a norm can produce feelings of shame that weigh heavily on the offending individual, even if no one else is aware of the violation (Harbaugh, Mayr and Burghart 2007; Mazar, Amir and Ariely 2008; De Quervain et al. 2004; Schlüter and Vollan 2011). The more thoroughly ingrained a norm, the higher the self-imposed cost of defiance. Conformance to a norm, conversely, produces pleasant emotions such as self-satisfaction and a "warm glow." Positive emotional response will be especially pronounced when norm compliance is otherwise costly to the aspiring do-gooder (Andreoni 1989; Frank 1988; Ledyard 1995).[12] We saw a concept similar to internal delta parameters in the section on equity theory, where inequitable outcomes produce feeling of guilt or anger and equitable outcomes produce contentment.[13]

In charging individual actions and outcomes with moral sentiment, norms also assume a public importance. External delta parameters are the costs and benefits imposed or bestowed on an actor by other actors following rejection or acceptance of a norm. Community members can expect punishment after engaging in some prohibited behavior. Avoid such behavior, however, and you avoid punishment; maybe you even net compensation. The exact nature of your penance or compensa-

[12] In keeping with our understanding of justice as a natural phenomenon, "do-gooder" in this context refers to someone who follows her community's norm in a given situation. Different communities will prescribe different responses to the same situations, leading observers outside the actor's community to disagree as to the propriety of her actions. And actors who belong to multiple communities may find themselves having multiple, potentially conflicting norms to follow or ignore.

[13] See footnote 5 from this chapter.

tion will depend on a host of factors. They may come in physical form, though they are just as likely to manifest as dirty looks or soft-spoken gratitude. In game-theoretic terms, external delta parameters "represent the costs and benefits of establishing a reputation" (Crawford and Ostrom 1995, 587; see Kreps 1996).

Norms provide readymade responses to a variety of situations. It is not so much that we decide whether or not to observe a norm; more likely, the behavior prescribed by a norm becomes routine. From childhood we are subjected to external deltas, which are steadily internalized (Ostrom 2005). There will be occasions, however, when the benefits of a communally banned course of action outweigh its costs, when the internal and external costs to norm violation are not sufficiently steep. Moreover, the actor conforming to or rebelling against a deontic is not alone in experiencing delta parameters. When a norm permits an aim, cost parameters fall on others who treat that aim as forbidden. These others may, depending on the magnitude of the costs, attempt to disrupt actions and outcomes that are communally accepted. It is not always possible to measure or even observe the various delta parameters that together influence norm adherence. Further complicating matters: Not everyone in a community will experience the same delta parameters for a given deontic, not all communities will have the same norms, and people can belong to several overlapping communities.

As norms, our understandings of economic desert will come with their own delta parameters and will influence our behavior regarding the distribution of economic resources. We will impose costs on ourselves should we feel some economic reward or our socioeconomic position undeserved. These costs may accrue as emotional baggage and, if severe, may prompt us to act—say, forcibly taking what we believe to be rightfully ours or giving away what we believe ill-gotten. The treatment we receive from others, too, will depend in part on their perception of our worthiness vis-à-vis our lifestyle and the economic station we inhabit. Similarly, seeing others in undeserved socioeconomic positions will cause mental anguish and may incite us to corrective action. The maintenance of economic justice—the balancing of economic outcomes with personal deservingness—is an important component of our personal wellbeing and of the interpersonal relationships that make a community.

2.4.3 Policy implications.

You know that engaging in unjust behavior, enjoying an undeserved outcome, violating some community norm will cost you. It will provoke a response in you and in others aware of your violation.

But the range of possible responses—the magnitude of delta parameters—is not always clear. There are times, however, when sanctions are made explicit. The most ready examples come from criminal justice. Consider these twin desert statements: People (B, S) deserve freedom from robbery (O); Robbers (B, S) deserve imprisonment (O). Knowing that she will be incarcerated if caught, a would-be robber can make a more informed decision as to the expected payoff of an upcoming heist. Her calculation will contain, among other parameters, the probability of being caught multiplied by her valuation of internment.

As this simple example shows, not only is justice articulated in desert statements, but the penalties for injustice can themselves be framed in terms of desert. There is a final class of institution—*rules*—that follows this pattern. Rules specify penalties for their violation, and the penalties threatened are backed by additional rules or norms meant to ensure monitoring and enforcement of the first rule. Community members share a moral conviction that people do not deserve to be robbed; they have a norm that people not take the possessions of others by threat of force. That norm becomes a rule when community members, gathered in a deliberative arena, (i) agree on and advertise a sanction for noncompliance and (ii) devise additional rules or norms that enable specific actors to look for noncompliance and discharge the advertised sanction (Crawford and Ostrom 1995). State legislators decree that burglary is punishable by up to x years of incarceration, they charge police officers to look for and detain suspected burglars, they direct prosecutors to convince jurors of suspected burglars' guilt, they instruct judges to sentence convicted burglars to x years in prison, and so forth.

Rules apply as much to economic justice as they do to criminal justice, and peoples' definitions of economic desert will influence their support for those rules. Tax policy, for instance, can be wielded as an instrument of governance and morality. Sure, taxes enable provision of public infrastructure, education, defense, etc.; but taxes can also act as a sanction, levied against people who accrue wealth improperly. When directed at individuals amassing undeserved wealth, the tax may itself be considered deserved. If, however, you perceive the sanctioned persons to hold a moral claim to the taxed wealth—if they deserved the wealth that was taken from them—then that taxation is unjust. More broadly, if a rule penalizes desert bases that you consider worthy, or fails to sanction bases that you consider unworthy, you will have some moral quandary with that rule. This proposition becomes especially important in democratic societies where public policy is devised in part by

public opinion.

Let us say we have two people, each a caricature of a moral-economic position. The first is a strict egalitarian, believing all people deserve an equal share of economic goods and an equal socioeconomic position. The second is a devout protestant, not in theological outlook but in commitment to the proportional balancing of personal industry and economic reward. Our imaginary egalitarian keeps to the first couplet of desert statement, our imaginary protestant to the second:

- **$\mathbf{DS_{E1}}$** People (B, S) deserve exactly as much wealth as everyone else (O).
- **$\mathbf{DS_{E2}}$** People with more wealth than others (B_1, B_2, S) deserve to have their excess wealth taxed disproportionately (O).

- **$\mathbf{DS_{P1}}$** People who labor (B_1, B_2, S) deserve wealth proportional to their labors (O).
- **$\mathbf{DS_{P2}}$** People with wealth beyond the value of their labors (B_1, B_2, S) deserve to have their excess wealth taxed disproportionately (O).

Under $\mathrm{DS_{E1}}$ all people merit an equal share of wealth, and $\mathrm{DS_{E2}}$ identifies taxation as fitting punishment for noncompliance with $\mathrm{DS_{E1}}$. Were a rulemaking body—say Congress—convinced of the egalitarian position, its members might produce a rule codifying it. Rules expressed as institutional statements have the same syntax as norms but with an additional component appended to the end: "group [attributes] [deontic] [aim] [conditions] [or else]." Read the contents of the final component as if they begin with the phrase "or else". In Congress's egalitarian legislation, $\mathrm{DS_{E1}}$ would essentially comprise the first four elements of the institutional statement and $\mathrm{DS_{E2}}$ the "or else" element, as shown in $\mathrm{IS_{E1}}$. Congress would buttress the noncompliance sanction (i.e., the "or else" component of $\mathrm{IS_{E1}}$) with additional rules and norms meant to ensure monitoring and sanctioning by the appropriate government agencies, probably the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and the Department of Justice's Tax Division.

- ▹ **$\mathbf{IS_{E1}}$** People [ ] [must not] [accrue more wealth than other people] [ ] [pay high taxes].
- ▹ **$\mathbf{DS_{E2}}$** IRS agents [ ] [must] [seek out and audit people suspected of accruing more wealth than others] [within their jurisdiction] [face reprimand].
- ▹ **$\mathbf{DS_{E2}}$** IRS agents [division heads] [may] [reprimand their subordinates] [ ] [ ].

Now think back to our protestant, whose moral notions concerning wealth acquisition are represented above as DS_{P1} and DS_{P2}. Economic justice for her is an equitable distribution of economic goods and status according to individual effort. She, like the egalitarian, is happy to see undeserved wealth taxed at a healthy rate, but the two fundamentally disagree as to what it means to deserve wealth in the first place. Were IS_{E1} merely a norm, its adherents might get quizzical looks from our protestant, who would think many of them self-deprived of deserved wealth. But as a rule, IS_{E1} and its corollary rules add an entirely new source of economic injustice, an entirely new means by which to misalign desert bases and deserved outcomes. Congress and the IRS are—according to the protestant—actively depriving certain people of wealth they deserve.

When a rule contradicts your moral economic position, its "or else" conditions are liable to generate (from your perspective) novel wellsprings of economic injustice. Under Congress's direction in IS_{E1}, the IRS taxes individuals with more wealth than their compatriots, regardless of whether those individuals worked for their "excess" wealth. Before this rule was enacted, our protestant would have perceived economic injustice when (i) an indolent individual achieved some level of wealth or (ii) an industrious individual failed to achieve an appropriate level of wealth. Following legislative adoption of the rule, our protestant will also experience moral outrage when the IRS takes from the industrious wealth she thinks they deserve.

In this manner, our moral-economic position—our understandings of economic desert and the institutions associated with it—takes on a political importance that transcends our daily-interactions with others. It influences not just our willingness to act charitably or uncharitably in our immediate interactions; it influences our support for parties and candidates and policies that concern people we will never meet.

2.4.4 Keeping sight of self and practical interests.

It is easy to overstate the importance of economic desert to our economic behavior, easy to retroactively frame personal or political decisions in terms of justice. In truth, people will do good things for ignoble reasons, bad things for noble reasons, and some things for no particular reason at all.

Think back to our hypothetical egalitarian, for whom all wealth above that which can be equally dispersed is undeserved and ripe for the taking. For instrumental reasons, egalitarians may not actually try to extract all that surplus wealth. An egalitarian politician, for example, may think it just to tax or even appropriate all wealth beyond an equal distribution, but that politician enjoys campaign donations from wealthy benefactors whom she does not want to upset. In this instance the benefits from *not* pursuing economic justice outweigh their costs (i.e., the relevant internal and external delta parameters). Welfare policy similarly blurs practical and moral interests. A fiscal conservative may fear that free delivery of basic services to the indigent dampens their incentives to find employment. That fiscal conservative may simultaneously believe that all people deserve access to such services. Her support for welfare policy will not be decided by her moral convictions alone.

2.5 Conclusions.

Before moving on to the empirical chapters of my dissertation, I will briefly summarize the arguments I put forward in this chapter.

Desert has all the hallmarks of a social institution. Communities face multiple multiple-equilibria problems, there being innumerable ways to divvy responsibilities and resources, punishments and niceties. Rather than rehash interpersonal boundaries anew at every meeting, community members erect social institutions that prescribe, demand, or forbid certain actions, with built-in incentives to conform. In so doing they generate a regularity of behavior enabling community members to go about their business with relative ease and greater efficiency. Although sometimes codified in legalese, I argue that people regularly translate institutions into a moral vernacular. Morals instruct us on right and prudent action, constraining our behavior and telling us what we might expect in the behavior of others. They are institutions, variable and evolved like any other social institutions. And by treating morals as institutions, we have a theoretical

grounding for why people might act in accordance with their morals—their assessments of justice and their definitions of desert—even if those actions appear to come at personal cost.

Moreover, desert is conceptually parsimonious, joining concepts that social scientists traditionally treat as distinct. First, it unifies the three major principles of distributive justice. The need, equality, and equity principles are not discrete values that people pick from some menu of morality. Underlying each is a desert basis suited to a particular context. An egalitarian, for example, is someone who thinks that good x should be allotted according to personhood. She is, at first glance, operating under the equality principle. But she is simultaneously acting on the equity principle: Every person receives x in proportion to their personhood, a scale that does not allow for much differentiation unless additional qualifications are specified.[14] Second, desert unifies distributive and procedural justice, the latter being the means by which the former is achieved. Distributive justice is concerned with determining desert bases, and procedural justice is concerned with the actual delivery of deserved objects to deserving subjects. Distinguishing between procedural and distributive justice, and between the three distributive principles, is fine as a shorthand when expediency is required. But generally better, I think, to drive right to the desert bases, objects, and subjects in question rather than erecting what are often illusory boundaries.

[14]Indeed, we could conceivably break "personhood" into its core components—rationality, autonomy, self-consciousness, for example—and rate potential deserving subjects on those, although this leads to some uncomfortable questions (e.g., Singer 2011). Binary, categorical, or continuous, we are nevertheless confronted with the question Hofstadter (2008, 18) and so many others have posed: "Where to draw that fateful, fatal line?"

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