

Psychological Constraints on Egalitarianism: The Challenge of Just World Beliefs

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Abstract Debates over egalitarianism for the most part are not concerned with constraints on achieving an egalitarian society, beyond discussions of the deficiencies of egalitarian theory itself. This paper looks beyond objections to egalitarianism as such and investigates the relevant psychological processes motivating people to resist various aspects of egalitarianism. I argue for two theses, one normative and one descriptive. The normative thesis holds that egalitarians must take psychological constraints into account when constructing egalitarian ideals. I draw from non-ideal theories in political philosophy, which aim to construct moral goals with current social and political constraints in mind, to argue that human psychology must be part of a non-ideal theory of egalitarianism. The descriptive thesis holds that the most fundamental psychological challenge to egalitarian ideals comes from what are called Just World Beliefs. A troubling result of Just World Beliefs, one that poses a *prima facie* obstacle to egalitarianism, is that people tend to dismiss or explain away any threats to their belief that the world is fundamentally just. The pervasiveness and severity of Just World Beliefs predicts that people will be resistant to egalitarian policies. My aim is to show how research on Just World Beliefs can help diagnose common problems for egalitarianism and assist in making realistic recommendations for bringing current societies closer to egalitarian ideals.

Keywords Egalitarianism · Just World Beliefs · Non-ideal theory · Psychological constraints

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Introduction

Debates over egalitarianism for the most part are not concerned with constraints on achieving an egalitarian society, beyond discussions of the deficiencies of egalitarian theory itself. It is acknowledged that there are limitations in implementing and accepting egalitarian policies, but rarely do egalitarians explore what implications these limitations hold for their theories. This paper looks beyond objections to egalitarianism as such and investigates the relevant psychological processes motivating people to resist various aspects of egalitarianism.

I argue for two theses, one normative and one descriptive. The normative thesis holds that egalitarians must take psychological constraints into account when constructing egalitarian ideals. To develop this thesis, I draw from recent discussions of ideal and non-ideal theories within political philosophy. Egalitarians, according to non-ideal theorists, should take current political and societal limitations into account when promoting egalitarian ideals, because taking the actual, non-ideal world into account is the only realistic way to pursue moral change (see e.g., Stemplowska and Swift 2012). I argue that non-ideal theories must also account for human psychology, because—like current social and political conditions—human psychology limits the achievement of moral ideals.

The descriptive thesis holds that the most fundamental psychological challenge to egalitarian ideals comes from a classic line of research on what are called Just World Beliefs (JWB). JWB sometimes goes under other names, such as the Just World Bias, Just World Hypothesis, or Just World Theory. The basic idea behind JWB is that people operate under the assumption that the world is a just place, commonly expressed in the psychological literature as ‘people get what they deserve and deserve what they get.’ JWB are considered to be a real psychological phenomenon shared to some degree by all people. A troubling result of JWB, one that poses a *prima facie* obstacle to egalitarianism, is that people tend to dismiss or explain away any threats to their belief that the world is fundamentally just. I will discuss experiments in which people perceive inequality, and specifically the role of luck in producing inequality, as threats to JWB. It is threatening when other people do not get what they deserve (or do not deserve what they get), because it suggests that *I* might also not receive what *I* deserve. The pervasiveness and severity of JWB thus predicts that people will be resistant to egalitarian policies.

The paper will proceed as follows: The first section situates my discussion of psychological limitations on egalitarianism within recent debates over ideal and non-ideal theories in political philosophy, and discusses how common objections to egalitarianism can be understood as posing constraints on achieving egalitarian ideals. I then describe a broad array of facts about our psychological profiles that hold implications for egalitarianism. While these are interesting, and any egalitarian theory should take them into account, I argue that the challenges provided by JWB are more serious. I then explain what JWB are in more detail and present several experiments that illustrate the challenge JWB pose to egalitarian ideals. These experiments indicate what processes are at work when people deny aid to others, particularly for popular egalitarian cases (such as those due to bad luck). The final

section draws out some of the implications of JWB for prominent egalitarian worries.

Limitations on Egalitarianism

Egalitarianism and Non-ideal Theory

Contemporary discussion of ideal and non-ideal theory primarily draws from Rawls' (1971) discussion of ideal and non-ideal theories of justice. Ideal theories attempt to identify the conditions of justice (or other similar principles) without regard for current limitations or constraints, while non-ideal theory 'asks how this long-term goal [of justice] might be achieved, or worked toward, usually in gradual steps' (Rawls 1971, p. 246). Non-ideal theory constructs moral goals with current social and political constraints in mind, while ideal theory does not. The normative thesis I will argue for here is that human psychology is another relevant constraint on achieving moral ideals (alongside social and political conditions), and so must be included in non-ideal theories of egalitarianism.

There are, generally, two ways non-ideal theory can be used to criticize egalitarianism as a moral and political ideal (drawing broadly from Sleat 2014; Valentini 2012). First, if egalitarians do not take into account real world constraints, they cannot provide effective strategies for transitioning to a more egalitarian society. Non-ideal theories are improvements upon ideal theories, according to this criticism, because non-ideal theories can better diagnose obstacles to change, and thus better understand how obstacles might be overcome in transitioning to a more egalitarian society. Second, if they do not take real-world constraints into account, egalitarians cannot provide action-guiding prescriptions for individuals. The constraints on individuals in the real world limit the 'action options' available to human agents. If egalitarians idealize the conditions of human agents in the world, they cannot provide guidance for the action options that human beings actually face.

However, both of these features of non-ideal theory can be used not to criticize but to *inform* the construction of ideals. As Hamlin and Stemplowska (2012) describe the relationship between ideal and non-ideal theory, 'the continuum of ideal/non-ideal theory is concerned with the identification of social arrangements that will promote, instantiate, honour or otherwise deliver on the relevant ideals' (p. 53). Both ideal and non-ideal theories promote and utilize ideals. The content of ideals within non-ideal theories is just more constrained by the actual world, and is aimed more at enacting social and political change. Non-ideal theory can thus be seen not as a replacement but as a supplement to ideal theorizing (see Simmons 2010 for a helpful account of how ideal and non-ideal theory can be pursued in tandem). My aim in identifying constraints on egalitarianism, psychological and otherwise, is indeed to supplement egalitarian ideals. I am assuming that egalitarianism is a moral ideal worth pursuing, but that it should be complemented with a non-ideal theory that takes into account the constraints I identify. The important question is how to go about pursuing egalitarian ideals, given real-world constraints.

The main reason to include *psychological* constraints in non-ideal theory is that human psychology is a central factor limiting the pursuit of moral ideals in the real world. As suggested by the first criticism of ideal theories mentioned above, one function of non-ideal theory is to diagnose obstacles to moral change. If egalitarian ideals are not successfully achieved or implemented, the non-ideal theorist would first ask *why*. Thus, non-ideal theory would seem to be committed to addressing *all* prominent causal constraints on realizing moral goals. As Wiens (2013) argues, if our aim is to implement moral ideals in the real world, the content of our normative prescriptions must incorporate ‘the actual causal processes that limit the range of feasible alternatives’ (p. 326; also see Wiens 2012). Human psychology, as I argue below, is one such factor that limits the range of egalitarian ideals that can be met, and thus must be included in a non-ideal theory of egalitarianism.

In the literature on egalitarianism, we can see roughly three different types of constraints on egalitarianism as a moral and political ideal: outcomes, procedures, and psychology. The distinction I envision between these is as follows: outcome constraints claim that some method for achieving an egalitarian society (most paradigmatically neutralizing luck) either fails to produce the desired egalitarian result or produces other unwanted consequences; procedural constraints claim that methods of equalizing certain goods can only be brought about through objectionable means (such as paternalistic redistribution policies); and psychological constraints claim that equalizing methods either have unwanted psychological effects or place some other considerable strain on our psychologies. In many cases, psychological constraints overlap with outcome and procedural constraints. These constraints are not explicitly identified by egalitarians—in fact, most of them are considered criticisms, not constraints—but thinking of them as constraints can help illustrate why Just World Beliefs present a challenge to egalitarian theory. I will elaborate on each of these distinctions below.

Outcome Constraints

Most criticisms of egalitarianism, especially criticisms egalitarians make of alternative conceptions of egalitarianism, are focused on what egalitarian policies should seek to equalize. For instance, among the most prominent egalitarian theories, there is significant disagreement over whether egalitarians should pursue equality of welfare (Arneson 1989), equality of resources (Dworkin 1981), equality of basic income (Van Parijs 1991), or equality of opportunity (which is actually a combination of welfare and resources; Cohen 1989). Acceptable egalitarian policies should achieve some outcomes and avoid others, but disagreement about what should be equalized entails that some egalitarian outcomes will not be realized.

Other criticisms of egalitarianism have focused on whether various methods espoused by egalitarians actually help achieve egalitarian goals. Hurley (2003), for example, has persuasively argued that neutralizing luck—the most common egalitarian method for equalizing a variety of goods—cannot ensure actual reduction in inequality. A luck neutral distribution might in fact be quite unequal. Neutralizing luck is thus incapable of fully achieving egalitarian aims. Anderson (1999) criticizes egalitarians for being blind to some of the most prominent social

problems. For instance, sometimes people do not want compensation for their bad luck. Anderson mentions people with disabilities who only want to avoid the social stigma associated with their disability, and attempting to compensate for the disability only exacerbates the stigma. These are generally identified as criticisms—undesirable results—of egalitarianism, but they can also be considered constraints. Even if achieving an egalitarian society is a desirable state of affairs, these other odious consequences limit the extent to which egalitarian policies can be realized.

The significant point here is that constraints exist on egalitarian theory *even if* we can agree on a central method of reducing inequality (like neutralizing luck). Even if we, say, focused narrowly on reducing inequalities that are due to brute luck (e.g., differential advantages due to genetic differences), we would still be left with a number of challenges. For instance, we would still have to decide how to reward effort and how to penalize the lazy and those who put forth no effort at all (Anderson 1999; Barry 2006). This just further illustrates that tension between the different possible outcomes of egalitarian theory poses a *prima facie* constraint on implementing egalitarian ideals in the real world.

Procedural Constraints

Another variety of constraints in the egalitarianism literature objects to the procedures that egalitarian theories employ. One commonly cited problem with neutralizing luck is the amount of information that must be collected from individuals and the invasion of privacy that this requires (Anderson 1999, pp. 289, 300–301; Cohen 1989, p. 910). Moreover, associated with information collecting is the explicit identification of some people as needing welfare. This can be degrading and stigmatizing for people. In many ways, egalitarianism appears not to show basic respect for persons (see e.g., Wolff 1998).

Redistribution policies are also frequently seen as paternalistic. What people receive as a result of redistribution policies may be entirely separate from what they would like to have or what they would choose to have. Even if people agree that inequality is bad, they often disapprove of the state telling them what equality looks like, even if it means greater benefits for them.

These considerations too are usually presented as criticisms of egalitarianism but function equally well as constraints. For instance, we will only be able to endorse egalitarian policies insofar as we can enact a form of egalitarianism that does not employ an objectionable form of paternalism. This does not mean that egalitarianism is impossible to achieve, but that the paternalism inherent in the theory presents a significant challenge. This is just one of many key constraints which must be kept in mind when constructing a non-ideal theory of egalitarianism.

Psychological Constraints

Just World Beliefs are a variety of psychological constraint, but the majority of the psychological constraints that can be identified in the egalitarianism literature do not, for the most, bear any resemblance to JWB. The primary focus instead has been on the psychological *effects* of egalitarianism. For instance, as mentioned above,

one feature shared by any welfare system is the potential humiliation and embarrassment of having to identify oneself as needing aid and assistance (Wolff 1998). Another potential result of explicitly identifying people in this way is that even those who are relatively well off may become more sensitive to their status relative to those above and below them. This might sound like a good thing, but it could entail pity for those who are worse off (even if they are better off only due to good luck), and an enhanced sense of envy for those who are better off.

One psychological constraint that is more similar to JWB is what I will call *luck perception*. Consider the line of thought, often attributed to Rawls, that we are not capable of accurately parsing out which aspects of our life are due to luck and which are due to choice, and thus cannot rely too heavily on policies that redistribute goods based on possession of either. While this is often identified as an epistemic problem (or sometimes a metaphysical problem; Scheffler 2003), it is equally a psychological problem. As will be discussed below, one central feature of JWB is a bias toward perceiving effort even in cases where effort is not present. While the epistemic problem of luck is widely acknowledged in the egalitarianism literature, it is rarely mentioned how much we *misconstrue* contributions due to luck on the one hand and choice and effort on the other. The rest of this paper will present evidence illustrating the ways in which we misconstrue luck, as well as other features central to egalitarianism, and will explain why these features of psychology pose constraints on meeting egalitarian ideals.

The Psychology of Egalitarianism

There are of course other psychological phenomena relevant to egalitarianism besides Just World Beliefs. I will identify a few of these before arguing for my descriptive thesis that JWB present a fundamental psychological challenge to egalitarianism.

Divergent Conceptions of Egalitarianism

One of the most extensive series of studies into the psychology of egalitarianism was conducted by Deutsch (1985). Deutsch identified three concepts that together constitute the concept of egalitarianism: equity, equality, and welfare. By equity Deutsch seems to mean desert, or what one is owed (usually considered as a result of one's efforts); equality corresponds roughly to what in the egalitarianism literature is called equality of outcomes, or everyone having the same amount of goods and resources overall; and welfare refers to need, and the types of things that social safety nets often provide.

This is interesting for many reasons, but for my purposes here it is interesting because other research on egalitarianism has found that use of these concepts varies by culture: Americans tend to emphasize equity (effort determines what you are owed), those from India emphasize need (welfare), and those from Japan tend to prefer equality (or equal goods overall; Heine 2010). Consider the implications of this. While individuals from any of these countries can presumably grasp

egalitarianism in some way, their preference for one conception of egalitarianism over others places limits on the variety of egalitarianism they can endorse.¹ This mirrors the discussion above concerning outcome constraints. Endorsing one variety of egalitarianism places limits on the extent to which other varieties can be endorsed. Here we can see that there are relevant psychological constraints as well. Americans who tend toward equity might have a hard time accepting policies based on equality of outcomes, for instance. The prediction would be that moving American society toward egalitarianism based on anything but equity would face more psychological resistance from ordinary citizens.

Indeed, there is evidence that Americans tend to be split in their understanding of what egalitarianism and equality mean. Monteith and Walters (1998), for instance, found that some people understood egalitarianism to mean roughly equality of opportunity, while others took it to mean getting out what one has put in. The latter is more congruent with equity. Haidt (2012) found that this division falls roughly along political lines. While liberals tend to understand the idea of fairness in terms of equality and caring for those in need of assistance, conservatives tend to understand fairness in terms of equity and desert, where people receive goods in proportion to their contributions (what Haidt calls proportionality). Conservatives thus focus more on identifying who is cheating the system while liberals focus more on identifying who is in need of help. Both, however, think of these concerns in reference to fairness.

These divergent beliefs about equality reflect underlying psychological differences that have implications for meeting egalitarian ideals. The degree to which a political conservative will accept egalitarian policies will be limited by the role of effort and contributions to society in determining redistribution. Social safety nets and neutralizing luck will likely be of little concern to the political conservative (at least in the U.S.).² The consequence for egalitarians is that if they dismiss such limitations, or refuse to take them into account when constructing policy proposals, their views are less likely to gain reception. This has obvious implications for constructing non-ideal theories of egalitarianism.

The Significance of Broad Psychological Constraints

While divergent conceptions of equality and egalitarianism place important psychological limitations on egalitarian theory, there are broader limitations that have more critical implications. The evidence presented in the last section referred to differences between people and between cultures, but there are other psychological processes that are more widely shared among all people. For example, perhaps the most relevant is a bias toward maintaining the status quo (or related biases, such as loss aversion, sunk costs, and regret avoidance; Eidelman and Crandall 2009; Kahneman et al. 1991; Sunstein 2005). This predicts that people will

¹ See also Verba (1987) for a comparison of opinions about equality among the powerful and affluent in the U.S., Japan, and Sweden, and Wong (2006) for further discussion about the relevance of cross-cultural constraints for the plausibility of egalitarianism.

² Though of course exceptions will be made for those who are perceived as having given great effort (such as members of the military).

find redistribution undesirable, regardless of the reasons in favor of such policies. This is likely to cut across differences in political orientation, and thus is more problematic for broad acceptance of egalitarian ideas.

Consider an experiment from Petersen et al. (2011) that attempted to parse out beliefs about egalitarianism from other processes that would make people biased against egalitarian policies. They presented Danish participants with descriptions of four people: a young man, an old woman, an old man who was described as having worked his entire life, and an old woman who was described as having a work-related injury. They then asked participants whether they would restrict social welfare for any of the four. Their hypothesis was that all three of the older individuals would receive benefits because participants would assume that it was more likely that they had contributed to the work force at some point in their lives. This hypothesis was indeed confirmed: only for the young man did the majority of respondents want to restrict benefits. Participants' egalitarian beliefs were also measured. An interesting result was that while people who scored high in egalitarian values were significantly more likely to find the young man to be deserving of welfare, they still found him to be much less deserving than the other three groups.

To explain their findings, Petersen et al. propose that we all have what they call a 'deservingness heuristic.' They argue that we deny benefits to people primarily based on the amount of effort they put forth. People who are not currently giving any effort will still be offered a certain degree of benefits if they have given effort in the past (which describes the case of the uninjured old woman presented in the experiment), while the least amount of benefits will be given to those who have never offered any effort at all (as is more likely in the case of the young man). This is significant to egalitarianism because of what it implies about how people judge effort. More will be discussed on this below.

The important point for now is what it means to possess a heuristic of the sort identified by Petersen et al. Heuristics are generally characterized by being activated quickly and outside of conscious control. Indeed, Peterson et al. measured response times in the above experiment, finding that participants who cited lack of sufficient workforce contributions when denying welfare were also the quickest at making those decisions. This was furthermore true regardless of participants' score on a measure of the sophistication of their political beliefs.

These results are significant because the 'deservingness heuristic' is thought to be a fundamental psychological process shared by all human beings. It operates quickly, automatically, and is relatively independent from other beliefs about egalitarianism. These features, as will be discussed, are also present in Just World Beliefs. JWB additionally present challenges to egalitarianism that are more pervasive and substantial than the deservingness heuristic, the status quo bias, or any of the other psychological processes above.

Consider two main themes from JWB research that will be the focus of the next section. First, JWB are often invoked to explain instances where people deny assistance to innocent victims. In particular, people perceive severe, prolonged suffering as threats to JWB, and thus attempt to resolve the threats, usually by blaming the victims and denigrating their character. This phenomenon has been observed across a great variety of experiments. The implication this holds for

egalitarianism is that people will deny the needs of those who are most in need of assistance.

Second, people see success owing to luck as a threat to JWB. As a result, in experimental conditions people tend to resolve this threat either by denying that luck exists or assuming the presence of effort in cases where there clearly is none. This often leads people to uphold inequalities (especially power inequalities) as in fact giving people what they deserve in precisely the cases in which the inequalities come about unjustly. This is more worrisome than other relevant psychological phenomena because it indicates a blindness toward injustice, as opposed to a lack of motivation to do anything about injustice (as is present in the status quo bias or in interpreting fairness as equity).

Just World Beliefs

Here I argue for and present evidence to support my descriptive thesis that Just World Beliefs pose a fundamental psychological constraint in meeting egalitarian ideals.

Innocent Victims

The collection of ideas that eventually came to be known as Just World Theory first originated in research conducted by Melvin Lerner and his colleagues (Furnham 2003; Lerner 1980; Lerner and Miller 1978; Lerner and Simmons 1966). The earliest research was focused on innocent victims. Lerner found that victims who people are otherwise inclined to help are blamed for their situation if the victims' suffering cannot be alleviated. The explanation offered by psychologists, as mentioned above, is that this phenomenon is the result of a bias toward thinking that the world is fundamentally just. For example, in one experiment (Lerner 2003) participants watched a video of people being shocked as part of a psychology experiment. If they were given the opportunity to help the victim, they would—an unsurprising result. However, if they were not allowed to help the victim, they would derogate the victim's character. This is curious, as nothing about the experimental conditions present an obvious threat to those watching the video or requires them to derogate the victim. This makes more sense, however, if we consider unalleviated suffering itself as a psychological threat to the participants.

One prominent challenge JWB raise for egalitarianism is that the problems egalitarianism is supposed to solve are the very entities that present a threat to beliefs in a just world. Consider an experiment relevant to those with disabilities. Hirschberger (2006) found that people were more likely to blame innocent victims if their injuries were severe and permanent. Participants were told about someone who was in a car accident that was caused by another person running a red light. In one condition (severe) the innocent victims had permanent spinal cord damage, while in the other condition (mild) people had only superficial wounds. Though people in both conditions were innocent, people in the severe condition were judged to be more blameworthy for their injuries than those in the mild condition. As in the case

described above, suffering that cannot be alleviated presents a threat to JWB. Persistent suffering inflicted on those who do not deserve it is incongruent with a just world; so therefore, people seem to think, victims must have done something to deserve their suffering. This is one of the most common and strongly confirmed findings in the JWB literature.³ Egalitarian theories that endorse luck neutralization would straightforwardly suggest that both victims should be compensated, since they were not responsible for their injuries. However, JWB lead people to make different judgments, in fact blaming the victim who is most in need of assistance.

This might seem so unintuitive that something should be said about why and how this response has developed in human beings. After all, denying suffering or injustice will increase suffering and injustice if people repeatedly turn away instead of helping, which seems incredibly maladaptive (if thinking in evolutionary terms). One way to think about JWB is as a response to a threat to one's understanding of the fundamental nature of the world. Two ideas that psychologists often associate with JWB that can help understand how JWB works are *terror management* and *mortality salience*. Terror management and mortality salience refer to people's aversion to things that remind them of death and their mortality. Homeless people, people with diseases, and animals are common elicitors of these systems. It is generally believed that an aversion to these things is rooted in evolutionary disgust systems that help protect us from contagion. So while it would be maladaptive to constantly turn away from suffering, this response can actually protect us if suffering occurs only infrequently. Believing that the world is safer than it actually is can provide confidence and lead us to take risks we otherwise would not take. So long as these do not actually lead us to our deaths, JWB and related systems can be beneficial.⁴

Consider another experiment on JWB, one with relevance for welfare systems. Wakslak et al. (2007) asked participants to read letters ostensibly written by high schoolers as part of applying to college. Some of the letters described people achieving success in the face of adversity ('rags-to-riches' stories), while others described instances of suffering and victimization (such as working at a homeless shelter after nearly becoming homeless oneself). In a later task, not associated with these stories, participants were asked to contribute to various social programs in the community (such as a tutoring program and a soup kitchen). Waklsak et al. found that reading the rags-to-riches stories decreased people's willingness to help the disadvantaged and provide aid to these social programs. The explanation for this is

³ One proposed explanation for how people are capable of blaming victims for their suffering is that JWB actually reduce the mental states people attribute to victims, thus making it easier to ignore pain and suffering. For example, Kozak et al. (2006) gave participants a story involving a poor college student facing budget cuts at his job. In one condition he keeps the job, while in the other condition he loses his job and, as a result, struggles to pay bills and buy food for himself. The results showed that those who learned that the student had lost his job and was suffering actually reduced the mental states they were willing to attribute to him (including goals, attitudes, and emotions).

⁴ To clarify, it is thought that being reminded of the presence of injustice in the world has a similar effect as being reminded of one's mortality. The link between JWB and mortality salience has good empirical grounding: for instance, prompting people to think about death leads them to be more suspicious of innocent victims; and conversely, presenting people with positive images of innocent victims increases death-related thoughts (see Landau et al. 2004).

that the rags-to-riches stories were 'system justifiers' (Jost and Hunyady 2005; Jost et al. 2003). People who are down on their luck are threats to JWB, and being exposed to people who overcome poor circumstances alleviates this threat. This subsequently leads people to be less concerned about those who are in need of aid. Similar results have been found in experiments where people feel less threatened by poverty if they think that poor people are happy and rich people are unhappy (Kay and Jost 2003; also see Benabou and Tirole 2006).

A troubling implication of this is that people's suffering will be dismissed in precisely the cases where egalitarianism requires that we provide additional aid and support. One could object, however, that surely the negative aspects of JWB can be suppressed or regulated to some degree. Indeed the claim here is not that people are extraordinarily cruel or insensitive. In dispassionate circumstances, with time to reflect, JWB might be less effective and thus people might provide the assistance egalitarianism demands.

One chief obstacle is that correcting, suppressing, or regulating JWB requires a great deal of time and cognitive effort. In many cases the level of regulation required will not be available. Furthermore, the processes associated with JWB are not readily observable, so people will generally be unaware that they are performing mental operations they would otherwise disapprove of (such as blaming the innocent). As mentioned above, many psychological processes (such as the deservingness heuristic) operate implicitly and outside of conscious control.

Consider an experiment illustrating the implicit nature of JWB. Hafer (2000) showed participants news stories of people who had been assaulted and robbed. In one condition, participants were told that the perpetrators had been caught and punished, while in the other condition participants were told that the perpetrators had not been caught and likely never would. Participants dissociated themselves from victims when the perpetrator was not caught, saying that it was more unlikely that they themselves would ever be the victim of such a crime. They also rated victims as more careless and irresponsible when the perpetrator was not caught. Hafer also used a modified Stroop task to measure people's implicit association with justice concepts. This task showed participants words with different colored typefaces, the ostensible task for the participants being that they had to identify what color the words were. However, some of the words were oriented around the theme of justice (such as *fair* and *unequal*). Previous research has found that the meaning or emotional valence of words can disrupt responses to identifying the color of the words. Indeed, Hafer found that there was more interference (as measured by slower response times) for justice-related terms after people were exposed to the stories featuring escaped criminals. This indicates that something about the uncaught perpetrator disrupted participants' response to justice concepts.

Though these results are not definitive, they do provide some evidence that JWB operates automatically and below the level of conscious awareness (for supporting evidence, see Murray et al. 2005). JWB fit well with other implicit processes in social cognition, especially those related to biases that we would not endorse on reflection, but maintain influence on us anyway (Bargh and Morsella 2008; Greenwald and Banaji 1995). This makes it unlikely that we can somehow suppress the more offensive consequences of JWB in order to treat people the way egalitarian

theory requires. The next section will expand on the research on JWB presented here but in application specifically to luck.

Luck Denial

One key idea behind luck egalitarianism is that people do not deserve their genetic endowments, where they grew up, who their parents are, and loads of other facts about their lives that cannot in any way be attributed to their effortful control. Achieving equality through luck neutralization thus requires people to recognize that people do not deserve things brought to them through luck (either good or bad) and that other ways of distributing goods must be adopted to correct for inequalities due to luck. Regardless of the practical difficulties in parsing out what is due to luck and what is due to choices and effort, we can agree that one of the first steps in moving toward an egalitarian society is to get people to realize the prominence of luck in our lives.

Unfortunately, luck does not fit well with JWB. According to JWB, people must deserve what they get. The prevalence of luck demonstrates that this is in fact not the case. JWB thus predicts that people will deny the existence of luck. As mentioned earlier, people are generally incompetent in luck perception. Indeed, Lerner (1980) describes cases in which rewards that are literally determined by a flip of a coin are judged by participants to be—somehow—due to effort or merit. Other research has found that those who score high on JWB tend to judge attributes that are clearly due to luck (such as attractiveness) as being just (Dion and Dion 1987).

Consider a fairly straightforward demonstration of the role of JWB in people's perception of luck. Ellard and Bates (1990) told participants that they would either be a 'worker' or a 'supervisor' in a series of small tasks, and that their role would be determined randomly. The determination was secretly rigged, however, so that the participants were always chosen as the supervisor. In one condition they remained the supervisor throughout all tasks, while in the other condition they switched roles with another 'participant' (who was actually another experimenter) halfway through. Ellard and Bates found that people who played the role of supervisor the entire time subsequently rated their own attributes (such as intelligence and likeability) as superior to that of the other person. This was especially pronounced in people who scored high in JWB. The explanation, once again, is that it is a threat to JWB for people to be granted positions of power and authority without deserving it, or without having some special talents that qualify them for the position (even when the position is given arbitrarily!).

An example with broader societal implications comes from Kay et al. (2009). They had Canadian students read an essay discussing the greatness of Canada, and then also had them read an essay stating that 90 % of Canadian parliament comes from the country's highest income bracket. In one condition, the stories also included an element of inescapability, indicating that it would be harder in coming years to leave Canada (though not for reasons associated with its greatness or the wealth of its parliamentarians). Finally, participants were asked whether they thought parliament should be made up of people with average wealth or people high in wealth. Results showed that simply telling participants it would be harder for

people to leave Canada made them more likely to justify the wealth of parliament, reporting that parliament *should* be made up primarily of the wealthy. The explanation for these results is that high inequality is a threat to JWB, especially when the inequality is inescapable. This leads people to feel the need to justify it in some way.

One final example illustrates the need to believe that one's efforts will be rewarded. The other studies just discussed demonstrate that people want to justify goods that come about due to luck, but why is this? The felt need to be rewarded for one's efforts provides a good explanation. The thought is that if others are not rewarded according to effort, then I might not be either! For instance, Correia and Vala (2003) had college students read stories in which other students like themselves worked really hard in school but ultimately failed. Reading these stories led students to judge AIDS victims more negatively and denigrate their character in a completely separate story. As we have seen repeatedly, the threat to JWB produces an amplified desire to protect oneself from injustice.

This section has presented evidence showing that JWB leads people to dismiss or explain away a wide variety of cases of inequality and injustice. People want to justify the system they are a part of, particularly when injustices in the system are inescapable. As mentioned above, this seems odd because dismissing injustice is likely to produce even greater injustice, making it harder to maintain one's belief in a just world (and in fact making it hard to see why JWB is beneficial to anyone). As Hafer and Bègue (2005) state with respect to justification of systems of power, 'paradoxically, a need for justice may exacerbate an unjust distribution of power' (p. 152).

One reason that this apparent paradox might not become problematic in real-world scenarios is that, unlike in Kay et al.'s experiment, situations of injustice are usually escapable to some degree, and we can identify ways of alleviating certain inequalities. Though nothing like this has been discussed here, the prediction would be that the negative effects of JWB would be avoided if people believe they can escape or alleviate injustice. This does not entail that people will rectify injustice, but at least they will not unwittingly work to defend it. Of course, the question JWB raises is whether this is enough to meet the demands of egalitarianism, and the evidence presented here suggests there is good reason for pessimism.

Application to Specific Problems

This section applies the research discussed thus far on JWB to a few notable problems in egalitarian theory.

Expensive Tastes

One of the most frequently cited problems with egalitarianism (particularly welfare-based conceptions) is that it cannot adequately address the creation or satisfaction of expensive tastes (Anderson 1999; Dworkin 2000). I will focus on the idea that egalitarians should promote the satisfaction of expensive tastes that develop as a

result of luck but not expensive tastes that are under one's control.⁵ One illustration of this problem is in relation to food preferences. We might think that people can control their food preferences (e.g., I do not *have* to eat expensive cupcakes), and thus an egalitarian society does not need to provide additional assistance to those with expensive food preferences.

Perhaps the main problem with expensive tastes is that JWB predicts that people will have precisely the opposite intuitions than egalitarians think makes sense. For instance, JWB predicts that people will think that those who are rich deserve their expensive tastes but that poor individuals do not. Take the example of food: JWB predicts that people will tend to think that those who are affluent and powerful deserve to eat expensive food, regardless of whether or not they could in fact develop cheaper tastes. It is not that JWB leads people to think that the rich cannot do otherwise but to prefer expensive food, but rather that JWB leads people to think that affluence is a result of great effort, which deserves to be rewarded.

Conversely, for those who are poor or otherwise suffering, JWB predicts that people will tend to judge that their expensive tastes are not deserved. This is particularly problematic because this will include preferences for goods that are much more critical than expensive food. People who need medication to, say, relieve non-life-threatening pain, may be judged to have an undeserved expensive taste. While pain is bad, the research on JWB discussed above showed that people with persistent suffering are denigrated as a result of the threat they present to a just world. It is thus likely that people will judge those who are suffering to be undeserving of state aid in alleviating their pain.

The Role of Effort

As discussed above, JWB cause people to see effort even when none is present. This presents a significant obstacle to egalitarianism. Above this was discussed in relation to people denying that luck exists, but replacing luck with its opposite—effort—is potentially more significant. In situations where people possess roughly equal abilities and opportunities, egalitarians generally agree that the degree of effort people give should decide what they deserve. It is hard to see how egalitarianism can get off the ground, however, if people interpret outcomes resulting from luck as in fact resulting from effort.

One obvious consequence of this is that people will tend to reward others even though they have not actually put forward any effort. As discussed above, however, it is precisely in cases of injustice and inequality where people are likely to impute effort into situations. This entails that it is the people who least deserve rewards who will be rewarded. The goods possessed by the rich and powerful are no more or less due to luck than the goods possessed by any others, but the goods of the rich and powerful will be perceived as being owed to them, as a result of their presumed hard work and effort. If we want equality, it is the goods of the affluent that need to be redistributed, but JWB is likely to make people think the exact opposite—if anyone deserves excess wealth and power, it is the wealthy and powerful!

⁵ An idea proposed in a slightly different form by Cohen (1989).

Effort and Cheaters

A corollary of the two previous sections is that people who are poor and powerless will be assumed to have done something to deserve their plight. The reasons for this will be varied, but, in light of JWB, it is expected that the primary focus would be on their lack of effort. Consider again Petersen et al.'s research on the deservingness heuristic. From their research, the claim made was that people have to demonstrate some level of effort in order to be considered eligible for social welfare. However, JWB predicts that the efforts of the poor and powerless will be ignored.

Consider how this relates to other research on deservingness. Petersen et al. (2012) propose that one function of anger is to reform cheaters. They found that when people (both Americans and Danes, in their study) hear about others receiving benefits while contributing nothing to deserve those benefits, the primary emotional response is anger, not contempt, anxiety or disgust (other potential candidates). People also show anger primarily in response to laziness, not incompetence. The explanation Petersen et al. provide for these results is that in our cultural and evolutionary history, cheaters would likely have been those who refused to share with the rest of the community, did not put in the same amount of work as everyone else, or who failed to reciprocate in some way. Monitoring cheating would have been exceedingly important, and anger evolved at least partly as a result of this need. Identifying cheaters matters less in contemporary capitalist societies, however, because others' contributions are often hidden from view. Nonetheless, it is welfare recipients who are frequently categorized as cheaters. Though we usually do not know why they require welfare, the assumption is that they are not contributing to society and thus do not deserve the benefits they receive.

This is a problem because, according to most egalitarians, it is misleading (or just inaccurate) to identify welfare recipients as cheaters. Receiving welfare should only elicit anger (in the way normally directed at cheaters) if a person receives aid without giving any effort *and also* possesses an adequate amount of abilities and opportunities. Many of those receiving welfare, however, may not possess abilities and opportunities that would qualify them to be legitimate targets of anger in this way. In many cases where egalitarians recommend that we neutralize luck, for instance, people receive benefits precisely because they are incapable of contributing to society. The paradigmatic case is welfare for those who possess various disabilities, but possessing bad luck, on many egalitarian accounts, is equivalent to possessing a disability, at least so far as welfare is concerned. The consequence is that redistribution either for welfare reasons or for neutralizing luck will likely conflict with JWB and our cheater detection system.

Conclusion

This paper aims to assist ethicists in creating non-ideal theories of egalitarianism. The research cited to support my descriptive thesis can aid in identifying which features contribute to JWB and thereby gain a better understanding of what constitutes a threat to a just world. A possibility that falls out of this is that policy

makers could attempt to avoid the features that are most likely to elicit JWb responses that we do not approve of. For example, there is some evidence that JWb is reduced when people think there are viable solutions to otherwise intractable problems, even if these problems are systemic and entail significant suffering (Beierlein et al. 2011).

Unfortunately, viable solutions are not always easy to come by. Moreover, it is hard to see how the two features mentioned above—inescapability and unalleviated suffering—could ever be put under adequate control by policy change. If we had ways of ensuring escapability and alleviating suffering, egalitarians might think that much of their work was complete!

A thought someone might have, though, when reading through the JWb literature, is that people will not be threatened by injustice if injustice does not exist. The egalitarian could argue that *if* we could achieve an egalitarian society, then JWb will have a weaker hold on us. People would not be able to justify unequal power hierarchies, for instance, because those hierarchies would have been eradicated. Or, to take another example, perhaps we could enact luck neutralization policies such that eventually the effort people impute into situations of luck would have fewer negative effects. The system being justified would be relatively egalitarian and thus unobjectionable.

This line of thought seems sound, and surely it is true that JWb would be less deleterious in an egalitarian society. However, there is enormous distance (psychological and otherwise) between current societies and one where JWb is relatively innocuous. This is where non-ideal theories of egalitarianism are needed, to make realistic recommendations for bringing current societies closer to egalitarian ideals. Focusing more on the psychological resistance to egalitarianism, rather than the familiar debates between different egalitarian camps, is likely to contribute to both practical and theoretical progress.

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