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Egalitarianism Legitimises Envy

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Abstract

Egalitarianism holds that distributive inequalities are *prima facie* unjust. Critics have sometimes accused egalitarians of being motivated by envy. This 'Envy Objection' has serious limitations, and as such has largely fallen out of favour. A more promising objection charges that egalitarian principles of *legitimising* envy, in the sense of entailing that envy is morally legitimate. When conjoined with the additional premise that envy is in fact immoral, this contention yields the conclusion that egalitarianism is not a true theory of justice. I present the argument and defend it against objections, before concluding with some reflections on the potential of a communitarian critique of egalitarianism.

1. Introduction: egalitarianism and envy

'All human persons are equal' – or so we tend to believe. When pressed with the immediate objection that human beings are radically *unequal* with respect to talent, intellect and moral character (to name only a few counterexamples) we quickly reply that the 'equality' in question is one of value or of moral status. All human persons have the same degree of moral worth, simply in virtue of being human.

While everyone agrees that this axiological claim must have *some* ethical implications, specifying what those are has proved a difficult task. For some, equal entitlement to a set of basic rights, including the right to life and to own and exchange property, is all that is entailed by the fact of universal equality. For others, this does not go nearly far enough, since it ignores the demands of distributive justice, which concerns the way that wealth, opportunities, welfare and/or other advantages are distributed in a given society. *Egalitarians* argue that said distribution ought to reflect the moral equality of human persons. In particular, they contend that distributive *inequalities* fail to do this,

and as such are unjust, unless perhaps they meet certain conditions. As a first approximation, let us define ‘egalitarianism’ as the thesis that unequal distributions of advantages are *prima facie* unjust.

Egalitarianism has historically been linked with left-wing political movements, whose rhetoric singles out widening gaps between the rich and the poor as egregious injustices. But most of us are disturbed by the sight of extreme material inequalities, regardless of our political predilections. Many are sympathetic to idea that a just society ought to be a ‘level playing field’, even if they doubt that this is achievable in practise.

Even so, egalitarian ideals have long been dogged by the charge that, while noble in appearance, they are in fact rooted in something ignoble. The criticism usually takes the form of an accusation to the effect that egalitarians are driven by feelings of envy, bitter resentment, and other socially destructive motivations. Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* excoriates the “preachers of equality”, whose “secret tyrant’s cravings mask themselves in words of virtue”, being full of “repressed envy” and the “madness of revenge” (2006/1885 p. 77). More recently, Friedrich Hayek commented that the “justification of [egalitarian] demands (...) rest on the discontent that the success of some people often produces in those that are less successful, or to put it bluntly, on envy” (1961, p.93). Robert Nozick expresses sympathy with this kind of objection (while falling short of explicitly endorsing it), noting the “ingenuity with which people dream up principles to rationalise their emotions” (1974, p.240). Of course, these accusations by philosophers have found counterparts in the world of politics, particularly among conservative politicians.¹

There are obvious problems with critiquing egalitarianism in this way. First, it is not a properly philosophical critique, but a psychological one, and thus to be substantiated by empirical means. While there is some evidential support for the theory that support for redistributive policies is often fuelled by envy and similar emotions (Sznycer et al. 2017), the examination of empirical hypotheses is well outside the scope of *a priori* philosophy. Second, there are other motives which could no less plausibly explain the convictions of egalitarian philosophers. This is especially true in cases where *A* is displeased by the fact that *A* is better off than *B*, or that *B* is better off than *C* in which case it hardly makes sense to invoke envy as an explanation (Crocker 1977).² Third, the *ad hominem* character of the critique makes it powerless against the egalitarian thesis itself, and the arguments mustered in its defence. For egalitarianism might still be true, and its motivating arguments still be sound, even if its proponents were morally

¹ Cf. Archer et al. (2022) for some examples of this, including Winston Churchill lambasting of socialism as “the gospel of envy”.

² Thus, sociologist Helmut Schoeck (1970) takes “the anxious sense of guilt” to be “one of the most important motives for joining an egalitarian political movement”.

discredited.

It is not surprising, then, that the ‘Envy Objection’¹ does not feature very prominently in the relevant literature,² though it is interesting to note that John Rawls, a leading egalitarian figure, seems to have taken it quite seriously (1971, pp.468-474). There has also been at least one attempt to demonstrate that “egalitarian demands are (...) expressions of envy”, based on a purely *a priori* analysis of the concepts at hand (Cooper 1982).³

But there is another, oft-overlooked way of characterising the relationship between egalitarianism and envy. Instead of thinking of the latter as constituting the underlying psychological explanation of egalitarian beliefs, one might reverse the order of explanation, and argue that envy is in some sense the *result* of egalitarianism. For example, Pope Leo XIII’s well-known encyclical *Rerum Novarum* condemns socialist economic policies (which are egalitarian in nature) on the basis that were they to be implemented, “[the] door would be thrown open to envy, to mutual invective, to discord” (1891).

We must tread carefully here. The Pope’s concern appears to be that, were egalitarian principles to be enshrined in law and to become culturally dominant, many would develop envious attitudes towards those more fortunate than themselves, feeling encouraged and vindicated by a theory of justice that stigmatises inequality *as such*, eroding social cohesion and trust. This too is an empirical thesis that is not amenable to strictly philosophical methods. In contrast, the closely related claim that egalitarianism *legitimises* envy, in the sense of implying that it is morally acceptable, or even morally required, is certainly within the remit of philosophy.

It is a claim of this sort that I wish to defend in this paper. I will first make a case for the immorality of envy, which will rely heavily on Aristotelian and Thomistic considerations about its nature and socially destructive character. I then articulate what I believe to be the ‘core’ proposition shared by all egalitarian theories, and argue that envy would be morally legitimate if it were true. These two steps jointly entail the conclusion that egalitarianism is not a true theory of justice.

¹ Sarah Protasi (2021) helpfully summarises the argument as follows:

(I)Egalitarianism is motivated by envy

(II)Envy is always a vice

(III)Political ideals motivated by vices ought to be rejected

(IV)Thus, egalitarianism ought to be rejected.

² Far more common is the criticism that egalitarianism is unmotivated, there being no successful arguments to the effect that inequality (as opposed to, say, poverty) is morally problematic. Some egalitarians would concede this point, arguing that belief in the (*prima facie*) wrongness of inequality is justified by a fundamental moral intuition, not arguments (Hausman & Waldren 2011).

³ Cf. Young (1987) for a response to Cooper.

2. The argument

My argument is as follows:

- (1) A true theory of justice would not legitimise envy.
- (2) Egalitarianism legitimises envy.
- (3) Therefore, egalitarianism is not a true theory of justice.

Since the above argument is deductively valid, motivating it will only require the defence of its two premises.

3. Motivating (1): A true theory of justice would not legitimise envy.

3.1. What is envy?

“... we grieve over a man's good, in so far as his good surpasses ours; this is envy properly speaking”

This excerpt from the *Summa Theologiae* (II-II:14:2)¹ contains the key components of St Thomas Aquinas' account of envy, which (unsurprisingly) closely follows that of Aristotle.

First of all, envy involves 'grief', that is, some amount of displeasure. Envy is never pleasant. This is in keeping with the definitions of some contemporary psychologists who characterise envy as “an unpleasant, often painful emotion” (Smith & Kim 2007). Secondly, the cause of displeasure is our awareness of another person's 'good', that is, that this person's life is going well in some way. While it may be tempting to stop here and define envy as 'displeasure at the good fortune of another', Aquinas offers two cases which show that such an analysis would be incomplete.

First, one might fear that another's good will bring about serious evils, such as if one's bitter enemy suddenly becomes very rich and powerful, increasing their ability to do harm. This would obviously not be a case of envy. Second, we may “grieve over

¹ I will refer to the *Summa* as '*ST*'

another's good, not because he has it, but because the good which he has, we have not" (*ST, ibid.*). This is what Aristotle calls "emulation" (*Rhetoric* 2:10) and what Rawls calls "benign envy" (1971, p.467). The critical difference is that while a benignly envious individual would not be pleased if the good in question was lost by the person that has it, a *truly* envious¹ individual *would* be pleased by this. The former may be saddened that he is not as wise as Socrates, but this sadness would not disappear if Socrates somehow turned into a fool. In contrast, an envious person would rather he and Socrates be equally foolish, than to be surpassed by Socrates in wisdom².

The two cases explain the importance of the "in so far as his good surpasses ours" clause in Aquinas' definition of envy, which Nozick echoes in the following passage:

"The envious person, if he cannot (also) possess a thing (talent, and so on) that someone else has, prefers that the other person not have it either. The envious man prefers neither one having it, to the other's having it and his not having it" (1974, p.245).

All of this suggests that we adopt the following principle:

Envy: A person *P* is envious if and only if *P* is displeased by the fact that at least one other person *Q* possesses some good *G* to a greater degree than the degree to which *P* possesses *G*.

Rawls adds the further criterion that the envious person would be willing to make himself worse off in order to reduce or eliminate the advantage had by someone else with respect to him (1971, p.466). Particularly intense feelings of envy certainly can drive one to such extremes. But to include this in a list of necessary conditions for being envious implausibly rules out milder (and surely more common) cases of envy. It would be strange to content that if Homer is secretly pleased that his neighbour Ned damaged his car, which is now no better-looking than his, this does not count as genuine envy because Homer was unwilling to go through the trouble of damaging the car himself since he thought it would be too risky. If I am only mildly envious, my desire for the object of my envy to be worse off than he already is might easily be overridden by other, stronger desires, such as my desire to not be worse off myself. This would surely not preclude me from being genuinely envious, if only moderately so.

¹ This paper will assume that 'benign envy' is not really a form of envy at all, in apparent agreement with Rawls, who contrasts it with 'envy proper' (*ibid.* p.467). Sara Protasi (2021, p.79) takes the opposite view, arguing that envy comes in 'benign' and 'malicious' forms.

² Or, as Aristotle helpfully puts it, "Emulation makes us take steps to secure the good things in question, envy makes us take steps to stop our neighbour having them." (*ibid.*)

3.2. Envy and feeling wronged

Crucial to our purposes is the relationship between envy and the sense of injustice. Rawls sharply distinguishes envy from *resentment*, which is the emotion connected with the perception of having been wronged (1971, p.467).¹ Rawls argues that resentment is necessarily a “moral feeling”, being essentially rooted in the belief that one is the victim of an injustice, while envy is not. Psychologist Richard Smith (1991) disagrees, contending that the very nature of envy is such as to give rise to the feeling that one has been wronged. He quotes the following excerpt from Pushkin’s play *Mozart and Salieri*, in which the play’s eponymous hero gives full vent to his envy of Mozart’s superior musical talent:

“Men say: there is no justice upon earth.
But neither is there justice in the Heavens!
For I was born with a great love for art:
When – still a child – I heard the organ peal
Its lofty measures through our ancient church,
I listened all attention – and sweet tears,
Sweet involuntary tears would flow”

Salieri considers that, given his love and sheer devotion to music, “the Heavens” ought to have gifted him with the musical genius that he lacks and that Mozart, to his utter dismay, possesses. Hence, Salieri feels wronged. But it would seem absurd and highly unintuitive to infer from this that he is not envious after all, or that the above outcry is in no way an expression of envy. If anything, it strikes us as a quite *typical* of an expression of envy, insofar as it asks ‘why him, and not me?’, a question we naturally attribute to envy. More reasonably, we should hold that envy can and at least often does involve the perception that one has been wronged. Thus, Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (2002) writes that envy may drive us to see our situation as “unfair”, as a “personal injustice”.² Similarly, Christopher Morgan-Knapp writes that envy presents a difference in material possessions as “undeserved” by the envier (2014).

¹ Aristotle likewise contrasts envy with “indignation”, which is pain at “unmerited prosperity” (Rhet. 2:9).

As we will see in 4.2., the contention that envy is necessarily devoid of moral content plays a significant role in Rawls’ attempt to disassociate his egalitarian theory from envy.

² Ben-Ze’ev even goes so far as to say that “undeserved inferiority” is the “core evaluative concern” of envy (*ibid.*). Curiously, he then goes on to deny that this concern is moral, apparently siding with Rawls. He writes that envy does not express “a general moral concern for justice, but a specific personal concern for what we consider as our undeserved inferiority”. This distinction strikes me as arbitrary: if I am specifically concerned that *I* have been wronged, why shouldn’t my concern not be a genuinely moral concern? If a concern can only be truly moral if it is ‘general’, it would follow that my anger at having been swindled at the shop is not moral, since I am angry that *I* was swindled. This seems extremely counterintuitive.

Even so, the majority position among philosophers rejects “the notion that envy (...) necessarily involves a perception that the envied’s advantage is unjust or undeserved” (Protasi 2021, p.35). Indeed, if an envious person claims to be fully aware that he is not entitled to the good that he envies, and yet sadly unable to rid himself of his envy, taking his word for it seems a reasonable course of action. But we may do so, while still recognising that envious often *do* feel entitled to that which they envy. As we will see, this recognition will play an important role in the motivation of the claim that egalitarianism legitimises envy.

3.3. What’s wrong with envy?

As we have just seen, envy is essentially a negative emotion, necessarily involving displeasure. This of course does not make it objectionable: Aristotle’s ‘emulation’ is also unpleasant, but it is hardly always reprehensible, and may sometimes even be admirable, depending on its object. For instance, the fact that I am saddened by my lack of wisdom relative to Socrates suggests that I value wisdom, which would be reflect well on my character.

Envy, however, is always a “bad feeling felt by bad persons”, Aristotle tells us (*Rhetoric*, I:11). Aquinas concurs, adding that to be envious is to “to grieve over what should make us rejoice, viz. over our neighbour’s good” , even when it does not harm me or anyone else. Even worse, the envious are disposed to take “joy at another’s misfortune” (that is, to experience what we might call *schadenfreude*). In that respect, envy is the inverse of charity (*caritas*, i.e. ‘love’) whose nature it is to will and rejoice in another’s good (*ST*, II-II:36:2-4).

The following simple argument summarises the Thomistic critique of envy:

- (i) I ought to will the good of my neighbour, if it does not detract from the good of another.
- (ii) To be envious is to fail to will the good of my neighbour, even though it does not detract from the good of another.
- (iii) Therefore, I ought not to be envious.

There is obviously considerable theological and scriptural support for (i).¹ Interestingly, the premise is also substantiated by the sort of moral and philosophical considerations that egalitarians tend to be moved by. Recall, the ‘starting point’ of egalitarianism is the equal moral worth or dignity of all human beings, from which the characteristically

¹ Aquinas goes as far as to call charity the “greatest of the virtues” (*ST*, II-II:23:6), in line with St Paul’s celebrated teaching on love (1 Cor 13:13).

egalitarian theses about distributive justice (which we shall explore in 4.1.) supposedly follow. If my neighbour is also my equal in value, it is morally appropriate for me to will my neighbour's good, since I will my own good. To neglect to will my neighbour's good would be to act as if I was more valuable than her. It would also constitute a failure to treat my neighbours as 'ends-in-themselves', which many egalitarians (following Kant) consider to be a duty¹ and which would require me to regard my neighbour's welfare as something to be willed for its own sake. Unsurprisingly, Kant disparages envy as a "vice", on par with "ingratitude" and "malice" (2017/1797, p.222).

The case for (i) is further strengthened if we restrict the scope of 'neighbour' to one's fellow members of a given political community. For then, the importance of *fraternity* must be accounted for. There is a philosophical tradition, exemplified by Ronald Dworkin (himself an egalitarian, cf. 4.1.), which characterise true political communities as being essentially "fraternal" in character (1986, p. 206-208), that is, analogous to families or friendships. Aristotle apparently agrees, pointing in *Politics* 3:9 to mutual "friendship" as one of the distinctives of a true *polis*, as opposed to a mere alliance or commercial agreement.

Members of a family, simply in virtue of being such, are in general obligated to will and seek each other's good, and the same applies to a circle of friends. If my political community is also a fraternal community, my general attitude towards fellow-members ought to be one of benevolence. This need not translate to feelings of affection (which, as Rawls himself notes, is an unrealistic demand in large modern societies²), but plausibly "requires us to want our 'brothers' and 'sisters' to fare well even when they are already better off than we are", as Geoffrey Cupitt puts it (2013). In any event, the demands of fraternity are surely inconsistent with regretting their good fortune, simply because it happens to be greater than ours.

This sheds light on John Stuart Mill's comment that envy is the "most *anti-social* and odious of all passions" (2001/1859, emphasis mine). If I envy the members of my political community, I wrong them, not only as human beings but also as fellow members, deserving of my good will.

Having laid out the case for the immorality of envy, we are now in a position to draw out the implications for a theory of justice that legitimises it, i.e. that would entail that envy is not immoral after all, if it were true. If envy is immoral, as I have argued, and egalitarianism instead implies that it is not immoral, then egalitarianism would have a false implication. But in that case, egalitarianism would not be a true theory of justice,

¹ As an example, Rawls writes that "the principles of justice manifest in the basic structure of society men's desire to treat one another not as means only but as ends in themselves" (1971, p.156).

² Rawls 1971, p.90.

since no true theory can have false implications. Therefore, my argument's first premise, which states that "a true theory of justice would not legitimise envy", is correct.

4. Motivating (2): Egalitarianism legitimises envy

4.1. The heart of egalitarianism

So far, I have spoken of 'egalitarianism' as if it were a single theory of distributive justice. In reality, there are many competing egalitarian theories, though they all share the conviction that unequal distributions of advantages in a given society are morally suspect at best. In a recent paper, Jesse Spafford (2021) provides a useful way of precisifying this egalitarian 'common core'. For all their differences, egalitarians are all committed to the thesis that "inequality demands justification".¹ To say that an unequal economic arrangement requires 'justification' in order to be just effectively amounts to the claim that it is unjust *by default*, or as it were 'guilty until proven innocent'.

The intuitive appeal of this thesis is aptly illustrated by Isaiah Berlin:

"if I have a cake and there are ten persons among whom I wish to divide it, then if I give exactly one tenth to each, this will not (...) call for justification; whereas if I depart from this principle of equal division I am expected to produce a special reason." (1955, quoted in Spafford 2021)

There is on egalitarianism a presumption in favour of distributive equality, which may or may not be outweighed by a moral 'justification' of an unequal distribution. As we will see, usual justifications include the claim that some level of inequality would benefit the worse off, or that some inequalities arise from differences in personal efforts and choices. In contrast, factors which are "arbitrary from a moral point of view" (Rawls 1971, p. 72) like belonging to a privileged social class or receiving a generous

¹ Surprisingly perhaps, Spafford contends that an egalitarian could consistently deny this, and instead hold that "most inequalities meet some sufficient condition of injustice" (*ibid.*). This would be equivalent to saying that inequality is innocent until proven guilty, but is in fact most often proven guilty. However, Spafford adds that there do not seem to be any egalitarians who take this view. I take it, then, that it is legitimate to treat the thesis that inequality demands justification as a distinctive and central commitment of egalitarians.

Even supposing some existing egalitarian theories do not accept it, I take it that what I will call the 'egalitarian thesis' to be sufficiently representative of egalitarian thought for it to be a suitable target of an anti-egalitarian critique.

inheritance fail to justify the fact that some people have, say, more opportunities for professional success than others.

Spafford spells out what we will call the ‘egalitarian thesis’ as follows:

Egalitarian thesis: “for any inequality U , U just if and only if (a) there is some true justifying conditional of the form “If p then U is just” and (b) p is true”.¹

Hence, any given egalitarian theory is distinguished from its counterparts with respect to whether it holds that condition (a) can be met – that is, whether it admits of any p that *could* justify an inequality, if it obtains – and if it does, what p is. To see how this is the case, consider the following examples of egalitarian theories:

Strict egalitarianism: inequality is always unjust, there is nothing that could justify an inequality. Only conditions of strict equality are just.

Rawlsian egalitarianism: an inequality is just *only if* it is such that the most disadvantaged are better off given its obtaining than they would be in conditions of strict distributive equality – this is Rawls’ much-debated ‘Difference Principle’ (1971, 65-70). For instance, an economic system that allows for significant differences in income may be more successful in incentivising productivity than one that does not allow for such differences. If so, the inequality-tolerant system may be expected to generate more overall wealth than its strictly egalitarian rival, in which case the poorest will fare better in the former than in the latter. In this instance, the inequality is vindicated by the Difference Principle.

Luck egalitarianism: an inequality is just *only if* it is the result of free choices, rather than ‘brute luck’. Or, in G.A. Cohen’s words, “[brute] luck is an enemy of just equality, and, since effects of genuine choice contrast with brute luck, genuine choice excuses otherwise unacceptable inequalities” (1989, p. 29). Ronald Dworkin’s analogy of an auction in which all participants begin with the same amount of bidding money and end up with different levels of wealth, through their free decisions on how to spend their money (1981) captures the luck egalitarian ideal for a just distribution of economic advantages. For example, society can (and should) tolerate that Bob is wealthier than Bill if this is due to Bob’s decision to work harder than Bill, but cannot do so if the

¹ Alan Carter (2011) offers a much less stringent account of egalitarianism, which he takes to be any “opposition to certain substantive inequalities”. This is clearly too broad, since it would entail that anyone who opposes absolute monarchy on the grounds that absolute power over others (an extreme inequality) corrupts absolutely is *ipso facto* an egalitarian. I take it most egalitarians would agree that this sets the bar too low, unless they are prepared to accept that virtually everyone is an egalitarian.

wealth gap is the result of Bill's poor health, which he is in no way responsible for. In such a case, Bill ought to be compensated for his bad luck.¹

The above theories all posit that distributive inequalities require some special justification in order to be just, if they can be just at all. In other words, they all agree with what I have called the 'egalitarian thesis', which I will take as the main focus of my argument.

4.2. How egalitarianism legitimises envy

Let us recall the outcome of our discussion of envy:

Envy: A person *P* is envious if and only if *P* is displeased by the fact that at least one other person *Q* possesses some good *G* to a greater degree than the degree to which *P* possesses *G*.

The envious person is therefore displeased by an unequal distribution of goods. Specifically, he is displeased by the fact that said distribution is less generous to him than to others. Suppose that the egalitarian thesis is true. If so, then the inequality that displeases the envious person is *unjust* by default, or *prima facie* unjust. This means that we ought to suspect this inequality to be unjust, until we acquire solid reason to believe that it is just, assuming this is even possible (which it isn't, on the *strict* egalitarian view). Now, there is nothing immoral about being displeased by an unjust state of affairs – to the contrary, it is good and appropriate to be displeased by injustice. Hence it follows from the egalitarian thesis that, against what was argued in 3.2., envy may in many cases be not only morally permissible but even morally *good*. In effect, if inequality is unjust by default, i.e. barring some special justification, it follows that envying someone more fortunate than oneself is conversely legitimate by default. The following argument summarises the case for (2):

- (iv) On egalitarianism, it is *prima facie* legitimate to be displeased by an inequality.
- (v) To be envious is to be displeased by an inequality
- (vi) Therefore, to be envious is *prima facie* legitimate on egalitarianism.

An immediate objection to (iv) is that it is not specific enough. Surely, one might argue, it is not just any displeasure that egalitarianism legitimises, but (righteous) *resentment*

¹ There is a strong anti-luck strain in the work of Rawls, who writes of the moral imperative to "mitigate the arbitrary effects of the natural lottery" (1971, p.64). This has led some to see Rawls' theory as a kind of precursor of luck egalitarianism (e.g. Kymlicka 1990, p.70).

in particular, which differs from envy in that it is a response to a perceived injustice, while envy is not. We have seen in 3.2. that Rawls draws this distinction; he draws it as part of an endeavour to disassociate egalitarian demands from envy (1971, pp. 464-474). Richard Normann (2002) likewise argues that the proper motivation for opposition to inequality is not envy, but by “a sense of injustice”. However, we have also seen that envy in fact and often does include the perception of the relevant disparity as an injustice. It is typical for envious people to believe that their inferior position with respect to more fortunate neighbours constitutes a wrong (‘why not me?’ they ask). Thus, the fact that the displeasure legitimised by the egalitarian thesis carries a moral judgment does not preclude it from being an envious displeasure.

Might egalitarianism instead condone emulation or ‘benign envy’, as opposed to envy proper? Once again, a benignly envious person is dissatisfied by his lack of some good which he sees in another person, but would not be pleased if said person lost the good, and both were equally deprived of it as a result. This shows that what bothers him is not the inequality itself, but simply the fact that he lacks the good. By contrast, a properly envious person *would* prefer it if neither he nor his rival possessed the good, indicating that the inequality is the true object of his displeasure.

It is instructive to compare the argument at hand with the traditional ‘Envy Objection’, which accuses egalitarians of being motivated by envy, mentioned in section 1. This charge struggles to account for cases in which the egalitarian is not among the disadvantaged, and the practical implementation of egalitarian principles would make her worse off.¹ Moreover, it depends on an empirically controversial hypothesis about how egalitarian convictions are formed, and targets the character of egalitarians rather than egalitarianism itself. My argument faces none of these difficulties, given that it makes no claim about the motives of egalitarians. Even so, its soundness would show that the traditional accusation was correct to suspect a connection between egalitarianism and envy, even if it was mistaken about the nature of the connection: whatever their motives, egalitarians support a theory of distributive justice that approves of and even encourages envy.

Also of interest is the contrast between egalitarianism and one of its more prominent alternatives, with respect to their respective relationships to envy. *Sufficientarian* theories take ‘sufficiency’ rather than equality to be of primary importance in the pursuit of distributive justice (e.g. Frankfurt 1987). Extremely unequal economic regimes are unjust, not fundamentally because they are unequal, but because they are such that the poorest fall below a minimum threshold of wealth and/or well-being. Conversely,

¹ In defending the Envy Objection, David Cooper (1982) suggests that egalitarians who are well-off “identify” with the disadvantaged, which I take to mean that they are in some sense envious on their behalf. This of course is a highly contentious claim, and one that critics of egalitarianism should avoid committing themselves to if possible.

an economic arrangement may include large inequalities and still be just, without the need for the inequalities to be ‘justified’ or ‘excused’ in some special way, as long as everyone is at or above the threshold. If I am below the threshold, it would be morally appropriate for me to be displeased by this. But note that my displeasure would not be rooted in envy, since it would have nothing to do with how well I fare compared to my neighbours. Sufficientarianism would *not* legitimise displeasure at being less fortunate than my neighbours, since it does not consider unequal distributions as such to be unjust. Therefore, sufficientarianism, unlike egalitarianism, cannot be said to legitimise envy.

Before moving on, a clarification is in order. To say that egalitarianism ‘legitimises envy’ is *not* to say that, if egalitarianism were true, envy would *always* be morally legitimate. In fact, there are two categories of cases of envy that are not sanctioned by egalitarianism. The first includes cases where envious feelings are provoked by an inequality that is justified according to the parameters set by the egalitarian theory under consideration. For example, Bob’s envy of Bill for his superior wealth is immoral on luck egalitarianism, *if* Bill became wealthier than Bob through his superior efforts. The second includes cases where one is envious of some good that is outside the purview of an egalitarian theory. Egalitarians have indeed advanced differing accounts of which goods ought to be equalised. For instance, Rawls offers a broad list of “primary goods”, including wealth, health, opportunities and liberties, to name only some (in sum, all “things that every rational man is presumed to want”, 1971 p.54). A more modest egalitarian proposal might limit its scope to, say, material wealth. Such a theory would *not* condone Salieri’s envy of Mozart’s musical genius, perhaps unless it was somehow the result of a wealth inequality.

A more precise articulation of the claim that “egalitarianism legitimises envy” would be to say that, given any egalitarian theory, envy ought to be our *default* attitude towards those more fortunate than us *with respect* to those goods that we have reason to equalise according to the theory.

4.3 Summary and transition

I began by offering an account of the nature of envy, and a justification of the common-sense view that envy is immoral. An envious person, we saw, fails to will the good of others, since he grieves over their good fortune inasmuch as it exceeds his, and is even disposed to rejoice over their misfortune if it means reducing the gap between him and them. It is thus no exaggeration to say that envy is a *malevolent* emotion (at least if the etymology of the term is a reliable guide to its meaning), running contrary to the benevolence that we generally owe to all human beings and especially to

members of our political community. Such a morally objectionable attitude cannot be sanctioned by a true theory of justice.

The egalitarian thesis, which holds distributive inequalities to be *prima facie* unjust, entails that we are *prima facie* justified in being displeased by them. This includes cases in which the inequality involves us, and we perceive that others are more fortunate than us. In such cases, it is at least morally appropriate for us to be displeased by the disparity, and thereby disposed to rejoice should the disparity be eliminated through decreasing our rivals' welfare. But this, I have argued, precisely amounts to being envious, even if it is accompanied by the conviction that one has been wronged by an unjust system. Therefore, envy is *prima facie* legitimate on egalitarianism.

My argument may be thought of as a kind of *reductio* against egalitarianism: we begin by supposing that the egalitarian thesis is true. If it is, it follows that our default attitude towards those who happen to be more fortunate than us should be one of envy. But we know that this cannot be the case, since envy is an immoral, malevolent attitude. Therefore, the egalitarian thesis must be false.

The argument may also be construed as an improved form of the well-known 'levelling down' problem for egalitarianism (Parfit 1997). If inequality is *prima facie* unjust, the objection goes, then making the most advantaged worse off without benefiting everyone else (e.g. by burning their fancy cars, so that no one possesses a fancy car) would be *prima facie* morally justified, since it would result in a more equal state of affairs. This is a puzzling implication, considering that no one has been made better off through this operation. But notice that bringing down someone else's welfare to his own 'level' (with no concomitant increase in his welfare) just is what the envious person wants. And if my argument is sound, egalitarianism sanctions not only the act of levelling down a society's welfare distribution, but the envious motives that might accompany it. Hence, the implications of egalitarianism are even more counterintuitive than the original 'levelling-down' objection had envisaged.

Having motivated my argument's premises, the time has come to address objections.

5. An Objection to (1): the defence of envy

While egalitarians have traditionally accepted the immorality of envy and hence energetically denied that their theories had anything to do with it, there are some notable exceptions to this rule. In recent times, a handful of egalitarian philosophers have produced qualified defences of envy, often on the grounds that envy is a

reasonable emotional response to serious injustice, and that it can be instrumental in fighting oppression.

Such philosophers appeal to Rawls' discussion of "excusable envy", which arises when distributive inequalities are so extreme that the disadvantaged cannot reasonably be blamed for their envious feelings (1971, p.468). Jeffrey Green (2016) glosses this as "*reasonable* envy", which he takes to play "an important role in the implementation of Rawlsian justice". Green bemoans the "widespread denigration" of envy by liberal philosophers, and goes so far as to argue that envy can be a justifiable motivation for egalitarian policies that will make all members of society materially worse off. Less radically, Harrison Frye (2016) accepts that envy is damaging "social unity" and that its incorporation in the principles of social justice would turn those into a "vehicle for inter-class rancor". Nevertheless, envy can be a useful tool in bringing about positive social change. While less respectable than benevolence, its self-interested character makes it easier to foment, and, while less than ideal, it is still preferable to apathy at injustice. In addition, envious feelings can serve as a valuable "trigger for reflection" on the causes of said feelings, hopefully leading to a deeper awareness of widespread unjust inequalities and the desire to fight against them. Similarly, Miriam Bankovsky (2018) argues that envy is "prudential" under conditions of injustice, and when one is unable to correct the injustice through socially acceptable means.¹

It is easy to see how these arguments could be marshalled against my argument's first premise, which holds that "a true theory of justice would not legitimise envy". If envy has the potential to change society for the better, then perhaps it is mistaken to say that it is immoral. And if so, that a theory of justice condones envy is no reason to discard it – on the contrary, it may even constitute a positive reason to embrace it.

In response, note first that to say that envy is some instances 'excusable' is consistent with saying that it is immoral in those same instances. Indeed, Rawls appears to recognise this since he falls short of saying that excusably envious people are morally justified in their envy, despite stating that it is "not irrational" and that we ought to sympathise with it (1971, p.468).² There is no incoherence in saying that a certain immoral emotion or act was nevertheless understandable given the circumstances, and even that the person who felt or carried it out should not be blamed.

¹ Sara Protasi (2021) offers a detailed and sympathetic treatment of these arguments. Alfred Archer, Alan Thomas and Bart Engelen (2022) also argue that envy can serve an epistemic function, enabling "new ways of seeing the world" which reveal the hidden injustices baked into capitalism.

Such arguments are reminiscent of the comment, referred to by Rawls (1971, p. 471), in one of Marx's early texts, to the effect that the initial overthrow of private property would be driven by envy.

² Bankovsky accepts this reading of Rawls, saying that "he describes envy as 'excusable', not 'justified'" (2018).

Secondly, even if we granted the hypothesis that envy can accelerate positive social change, this would not by itself imply that envy is morally justifiable. For suppose we had good reasons to believe that the cruelty and sadism of the French revolutionaries had played a decisive role in bringing the deeply inegalitarian *Ancien Régime* to its knees (perhaps by terrifying the aristocracy and their supporters into compliance), laying the foundations for a more just society. Many, including many ethical consequentialists, would balk at the idea that cruelty and sadism were therefore not immoral in this case. We may apply this problem directly to Frye's suggestion that envy can serve as a valuable "trigger for reflection": if I have a burning desire to murder the rich, this may well lead me to reflect on the causes of my murderous rage, which may in turn create an awareness of the unjust structures that generate these feelings. But one surely could not infer from this that these feelings were morally justified.¹ At the very least, then, it is highly unclear that the political potential of envy would absolve it. The onus is on envy's defenders to show why it would.

Thirdly, it is far from clear that we have been given strong reasons to believe that envy plays a significant role in fighting against injustice, let alone an indispensable one. The authors listed above offer little by the way of evidence in support of their empirical hypotheses. Frye admits that it would be "extremely difficult" to empirically verify his claim that envy is easier to stir up than righteous indignity (2016, fn.49), though he adds that this does not detract from his main argument, whose purpose is to show that "that envy is valuable to justice, not that envy is more valuable than other emotions" (*ibid.*). Very well, but if no confident claim can be made about the envy's potential to bring about positive change *relative to other, nobler emotions*, the case for the moral legitimacy of envy turns out to be surprisingly weak. For then, we can only say that envy has *some* potential to bring about change, not that it is particularly good at it.

I conclude that the putative positive effects of envy fail to show that envy is not immoral, and that it would not be legitimised by a true theory of justice.

¹ Frye may well agree with me here, since he holds envy to be among the "negative features of our nature", despite its usefulness (2016).

6. An objection to (2): envy and self-esteem

My argument's second premise holds that egalitarianism legitimises envy. Let us recall once more our account of envy:

Envy: A person P is envious if and only if P is displeased by the fact that at least one other person Q possesses some good G to a greater degree than the degree to which P possesses G .

Some would argue that this definition leaves out an essential feature of envy, namely that it perceives the other person's advantage as a threat to self-esteem. In an attempt to explain why it is that people envy those more fortunate than themselves rather than being happy for them, Nozick suggests that an envious person is "made to feel inferior to the other in some important way" (1974, p.240). This is because we have no way to evaluate ourselves with respect to some skill, trait or quality other than to compare ourselves to others. Thus, when presented with someone who is better than we are in the relevant respect, we evaluate ourselves negatively, and feel displeased as a result; hence our displeasure at the good fortune of others.

While Nozick offered this account as a plausible etiology of envy, but some have taken his idea further. Christopher Morgan-Knapp (2014) argues that the perceived threat to self-worth is not only a cause of envy, but it is a part of its essence. Miriam Bankovsky (2018) and Sara Protasi (2021, p.23) take the same view.

How might this be thought to pose a problem for my argument's second premise? I argued that given the egalitarian thesis, it is *prima facie* appropriate to be displeased by the fact that someone is more fortunate than us in some respect. The egalitarian could agree with this, but disagree with my further claim that the egalitarian thesis legitimises envy. For envy, she could argue, is more specific than being displeased by a distributive inequality that involves us, and in which we are the disadvantaged party. An envious person is displeased by the inequality because *it makes him feel inferior*. But the egalitarian thesis does not legitimise this. Rather, it legitimises feeling displeased by inequality *because it contradicts true principles of justice* (in short, because it is unjust). Thus, egalitarianism does not condone envy.

No doubt, envy can be (and often is) provoked by feelings of inferiority, and directed at individuals considered to be 'superior' in some way. But to say that this is *necessarily* the case has the strange implication that only what we might call 'better-making' traits – that is, traits taken to make their bearers 'better' in the sense of being more worthy of praise or admiration than they otherwise would be – can be the subject of envy. In other words, I could not be envious of someone's possession of some good

G unless I believed that possessing G makes one a 'better' person (in a broad sense, which includes but is not limited to the moral).

Now, we generally do not believe that being wealthy makes one a 'better' person in any sense (if anything, we tend to suspect the opposite). Yet, economic envy is extremely common. If envy is necessarily a reaction to a threat to self-esteem, it follows that all the economically envious implicitly hold the belief that being rich is in itself worthy of admiration. If I envy someone for winning the lottery, this must be because I believe that winning the lottery is admirable in itself, and that I feel inferior to the lottery-winner. I take this to be an implausible result, and hence remain unconvinced that the account of envy ought to include feelings of inferiority as an essential component.

But suppose for argument's sake that the envier's displeasure necessarily arises from the fact that he feels inferior to the envied. This is consistent with saying that an envious person is displeased by an inequality *because* he considers it to be an injustice. For one might form the belief that some inequality is unjust as a result of the fact that it makes us feel inferior. For instance, we can easily imagine that Salieri's feelings of inferiority with respect to Mozart brought about his firm belief in the unfairness of Mozart's superior musical talent. After all, he would likely never have given any thought to the justice or injustice of the difference in talent, had it not undermined his sense of self-worth.

The fact that envy is necessarily a symptom of a low self-esteem would therefore not preclude it from being legitimised by egalitarianism, as long as the envier believes that his rival's greater fortune is unfair, and that this causes him to be displeased by it.

But perhaps the true concern underlying the above objection has to do with the apparently egotistical nature of envy: when I feel envious, I am upset that I am less fortunate than my neighbour. If our positions were switched, I would no longer be displeased (so the argument would go). In contrast, it may be thought that the moral indignation encouraged by egalitarianism is 'selfless', in that it is displeased by the fact that *some* inequality obtains, regardless of whether the indignant person is involved, and if he is, whether it is as the advantaged or the disadvantaged party.

It is true Pedro's *envy* of Pablo's greater wealth would disappear if Pablo suddenly lost most of his money at around the same time that Pedro acquired a very generous inheritance. But Pedro might still be displeased by the difference in wealth between himself and Pablo, if, say, he considers it to be unfair. It is just that his displeasure would no longer be *envious* displeasure. The fact that he is still displeased after their fortunes were reversed does not show that he was never envious to begin with. It just

shows that Pedro is capable of feeling both envy *and* indignation at what he perceives to be a wrong suffered by another.

But even supposing that Pedro is not at all bothered by Pablo's sudden misfortune, it is not at all clear that his envy, on egalitarianism, was illegitimate. More plausibly, his envy *was* legitimate (since it was indignant displeasure at a *prima facie* unjust state of affairs); it is his lack of indignation after the switch that is illegitimate. We may of course chide him for his lack of consistency or care for others, but surely not for caring that he was wronged (more generally: if I am outraged by a grave injustice *A* but not by an equally grave injustice *B*, it is the latter that is illegitimate, not the former).

I conclude that envy, even if egotistical or driven by low self-esteem, is not illegitimate given egalitarianism.

7. Conclusion: the Envy Objection revitalised

I began with the argument that opposition to inequality and support for egalitarian principles are expressions of envy. We have seen that this kind of critique of egalitarianism has serious limitations, and as such has largely fallen out of favour. However, the success of my argument would show that there is another, more promising way of objecting to egalitarianism by associating it with envy. This revised Envy Objection has nothing to say about the hidden motivations of egalitarians, and instead argues that envy would be morally legitimate if egalitarianism was a true theory of justice. When conjoined with the additional premise that envy is in fact immoral (given its malevolent nature), this contention yields the conclusion that egalitarianism is not a true theory of justice. This is no insignificant result, given the popularity of egalitarianism among philosophers: a well-known survey reports that over a third of professional philosophers consider themselves to be egalitarian (as opposed to less than 10% identifying as libertarian, Chalmers & Bourget 2014).

I would like to finish with the suggestion that my revised Envy Objection could form part of what I will call the *communitarian critique* of egalitarianism. Recall that one of the reasons for judging envy to be immoral was that it is inconsistent with the demands of fraternity, which require us to will the good of fellow members of a political community. Now, egalitarianism has sometimes been defended on the grounds that greater distributive equality promotes fraternity (Cohen 2006, p.3 ; Miller 2005, p.77). If conditions are too unequal, it is thought, the less fortunate will envy their more advantaged fellow citizens, undercutting social unity. Rawls, for instance, worries that

stark inequalities will fuel “hostile outbreaks of envy”, which a well-ordered society would strive to prevent (1971, p.469).

In truth, the idea of a simple positive correlation between envy and inequality in a given society is simplistic at best. In response to Rawls, Ben-Ze’ev (1992) cites empirical studies indicating that “envy does not diminish with reduced inequality but often even increases”, because people are less tolerant of inequalities when they obtain between individuals of similar socioeconomic levels.¹ Interestingly for our purposes, he adds that envy would have more “legitimacy” in a radically egalitarian Israeli *kibbutz*, since egalitarian principles “may be perceived as implying some justification of envy”, leading to a decreased ability to be content with one’s situation. This is indeed what we would naturally expect of a self-consciously egalitarian community, *if* my argument is sound and egalitarianism *truly* legitimises envy (rather than simply appearing to legitimise it).

Again, identifying causal relationships between a society’s ruling moral ideas and the ways in which its members perceive and relate to one another is a task for social science, not *a priori* philosophy. Even so, the fact that egalitarianism is at odds with the good of fraternity at the level of theory would surely count as a reason to reject it, whatever the real-world consequences of this fact. Fraternity, of course, is the value associated with communitarian theories – we might say that it is to communitarianism what equality is to egalitarianism, or what liberty is to liberalism. The communitarian charge that liberalism is “all liberty and equality, with no fraternity” (Cunningham 1991), giving “priority to individual freedom over communal values (...) which give meaning to human lives” (Gutmann 2001) is well-known. But possible tensions between communitarian concerns and specifically egalitarian ideals remains under-explored. Perhaps my argument will stimulate more inquiry into this largely uncharted territory.

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¹ One is reminded of the ‘Tocqueville Paradox’, well-known to social scientists, according to which dissatisfaction over inequality (and the likelihood of violent revolution) increases as conditions become more equal, not less (Elster 2009, p.2)

Aristotle had already noted that envy is aroused by “the prosperity (...) of people who are like us or equal with us” (*Rhetoric* II:9).

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