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'The many faces of laziness'

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ABSTRACT

What do we owe to the lazy? On the assumption that the lazy are a paradigmatic case of people who are worse off, when they are through a fault, or choice, of their own, one might suspect that the answer is: not very much. This article shows that this suspicion is simple-minded. Four notions of laziness are distinguished. It is then shown that these notions differ – even from a luck egalitarian perspective – in ways bearing on the question of what is owed to the lazy. It is claimed that in some – but not all – cases, being lazy grounds a claim to compensation rather than forming a ground for withholding it.

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Introduction

What is owed to the lazy?¹ If you ask a luck egalitarian, the answer you may well get is that we owe less to lazy people who are worse off than we do to non-lazy people who are equally worse off.² After all, luck egalitarians believe that 'It is bad – unjust and unfair – for some to be worse off than others

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¹I do not define 'lazy person', and since one's conduct can be uncharacteristically lazy without one being a lazy person, the discussion, which is structured by the general question 'How does being lazy in the relevant sense affect what is owed to one?', does not answer the question 'What is owed to the lazy?', where 'the lazy' refers to characteristically lazy people. However, answers to the former question will presumably significantly shape the answer to the latter.

²Many lazy people are not worse off, and some extremely well-off people are lazy. Poor people are often unfairly stigmatised as lazy in a way intended to justify inequality (e.g. see Bullock 1995; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, and Tagler 2001; Lindqvist, Björklund, and Bäckström 2017). In this article, I set aside how the rich and the poor compare as regards laziness in the interest of focusing on the case of those worse-off people who are, in a sense to be clarified below, lazy. Laziness is also often thought of in racialised terms and associated with hierarchies of race. For an insightful exposition of Kant's views here, see Lu-Adler (2022, esp. 263–267, 273).

through no fault [or choice] of their own' (Dworkin 1981, 292–293, 305; Lippert-Rasmussen 2015, 1–34; Temkin 1993, 13; compare Cohen 1989, 116).

Assuming that worse-off lazy people are worse off because of their laziness (so that the requirement signalled by 'through' is satisfied) and that laziness is a fault or is manifested in the choices one makes (so that the requirement signalled by 'fault or choice' is satisfied), something like this view appears to follow relatively straightforwardly from the luck egalitarian credo.³ Or, as one might also put the luck egalitarian perspective on laziness in slightly stronger terms: lazy people who are worse off because of their laziness are responsible for their being worse off, and thus, their being so is not unjust. Unsurprisingly, then, luck egalitarians sometimes refer to lazy people to illustrate that it is possible to be worse off than others without injustice. Reflecting on the idea of someone who is worse off in a way that does not merit compensation, the luck egalitarian G. A. Cohen (1989, 911) notes: 'Some [converters of resources into welfare] are inefficient because they are negligent or feckless in a morally culpable way: they buy their food at Fortnum's because they cannot be bothered to walk up the Berwick Street market'.⁴ Similarly, in his account of socialism, Cohen mentions the fable of the ants and the grasshopper, in which he says, 'inequalities of aggregate benefit are justified by differential exercises of effort and/or care by [individuals], who are, initially, absolutely equally placed, and who are equal even in their capacities to expend effort and care' (Cohen 2006, 27).⁵

Importantly, luck egalitarians are not alone in thinking we owe less, justice-wise, to the lazy than we do to the diligent.⁶ Indeed, one of their staunchest critics, Elizabeth Anderson (1999, 288), rebukes luck egalitarians for singling out 'beach bums [van Parijs' surfers at Malibu beach: KLR], the lazy and irresponsible' for special attention. For my purposes, the specific objection of interest is the one she makes to Philippe van Parijs'

³Typically, luck egalitarians are unclear about what sort of fault is referred to in their credo. For example, is it a prudential mistake (such that if one imprudently refrains from stealing other people's money, one might then not be entitled to compensation for being worse off) or a moral mistake (such that if one refrains from jumping into the water to rescue the drowning child, reasonably, but mistakenly, believing that this would be imprudent, and is burdened by bad conscience subsequently, one is not entitled to compensation)? More on this later.

⁴Cohen does not use the term 'lazy' here, but standardly dictionaries list 'lazy' and 'slothful' as alternatives to 'feckless'.

⁵Again, Cohen does not say the grasshopper is lazy, but in explanations of the moral of the fable, it is crucial that the grasshopper is described in that capacity.

⁶'Justice-wise' is an important qualification. Typically, luck egalitarians are pluralists. They accept that there are moral reasons bearing on distribution other than those captured by luck egalitarianism. Hence, it is consistent with their view that we have reason to assist badly off lazy people for reasons unconnected with distributive justice.

defence of a basic income in 'Why Surfers Should be Fed'.⁷ In Anderson's view:

[the] chief difficulty with his proposal is that [van Parijs'] basic income would be awarded to all unconditionally, regardless of whether they were able or performing socially useful work. Lazy, able-bodied surfers would be just as entitled to that income as dependent caretakers or the disabled ... Van Parijs's proposal effectively indulges the tastes of the lazy and irresponsible at the expense of others who need assistance. (Anderson 1999, 299)

But is it true? Do we owe less to the lazy, and if we do, why? What makes this the case? To answer these questions, we must think carefully about what exactly laziness is. Drawing on the belief–desire model of action (Smith 1994, 92–129) – as it seems safe to do since laziness is presumably a trait manifested in, or constituted by, one's actions and dispositions to act – I will distinguish between three broad notions of laziness and examine their relationships to one another. Essentially, one can be lazy in virtue of the following: what one does (in two senses – instrumental irrationality and work laziness: Sections 2 and 3); what one is (not) motivated to do (conative laziness: Section 4); and what one believes (self-deception laziness: Section 5).⁸ One of my goals is to show that we use the word 'laziness' to refer to several quite different traits. Since the concept of laziness is undertheorised in the philosophical literature, the pursuit of this goal is worthwhile as such. But for each of the senses I separate, I will also ask what we owe to those who are lazy in that particular way. That allows me to achieve my second goal, which is to show that from a luck egalitarian perspective, what is owed depends on both the specific variety of luck egalitarianism we have in mind and the type of laziness we are talking about. Hence, while I am not submitting that lazy people are never justly worse off from a luck egalitarian perspective, I am submitting that luck egalitarians should adopt a much more

⁷That title is excellent because it implies a provocative question – provocative because many, justifiably or not, think of surfers as lazy and think that such lazy, able-bodied people who are not willing to work should not be fed by others (or should at least be fed less well). Tellingly, the story of Crazy, who wants to earn a high income, and Lazy, 'who is less excited by the prospect of a high income and has decided to take it easy' (Van Parijs 1991, 105) plays a central role in van Parijs' article. In part, the van Parijs paper is a reaction to Rawls' attempt to adjust his account of primary goods, governed by the difference principle, to include leisure in order to avoid Musgrave's objection that his theory of justice in its unadjusted version 'leads to a redistributive system that, among individuals with equal earning ability, favors those with a high preference for leisure' (Musgrave 1974, 632; see Rawls 1988, 257 note 7).

⁸To complete the overview of the taxonomy on offer, in Section 2, I also identify a sub-species of instrumental-irrationality laziness: imprudence irrationality; a third and unreflective form of irrationality focusing on the lazy person's actions: desirability irrationality; and the complement concept to instrumental-irrationality laziness: instrumental-irrationality hyperactiveness.

nuanced view of what justice requires regarding worse-off lazy people than that conveyed in much of the luck egalitarian literature.

As regards the first of these issues, it matters how both the luck component and the currency component of luck egalitarianism are specified.⁹ The former issue concerns that which is a matter of bad luck, e.g. disadvantages that are not suitably related to choices made by the agent or disadvantages that were outside the agent's control. The latter issue concerns the dimension in which people should be equally well off, e.g. resources or welfare. I am interested in showing that although luck egalitarianism is often thought to deny compensation to those who are lazy and worse off, this view is too simplistic. In some important understandings of laziness (to be introduced below), some forms of luck egalitarianism imply that some people who are worse off as a result of their own laziness should be compensated. In fact, returning to my opening question, it is not just that the answer 'less than we owe to the diligent' overlooks exceptions. Rather, as I see it, other things being equal, in some versions of luck egalitarianism, we sometimes owe 'more' to the lazy than we do to those who are not lazy – e.g. when, on account of the relevant theory of well-being, they are worse off in virtue of their laziness.

I tease out the issues within the luck egalitarian perspective partly because, to my mind, luck egalitarianism forms a plausible component in an overall theory of justice. But there are other reasons for confining the discussion in this way. One is this. As I have just explained, our intuitions about laziness are invoked by luck egalitarians in support of their theories. The tendency of my discussion is to problematise this strategy in a way that sheds light on what, in the way of laziness-based considerations, luck egalitarians are entitled to rely on. Another, and the most important, reason for concentrating on luck egalitarianism is that it represents a hard case. By this I mean that if it can be shown that we have significant duties to some lazy people in the luck egalitarian view, then – since that view is, or has been taken by its advocates to be, quite unsupportive of duties to the lazy – this really should strengthen the case for thinking that there are such duties.

One reservation about the taxonomy of laziness that I propose below needs to be addressed head-on. As will become clear shortly, in my account, there is no common core of the different conceptions of laziness I identify below. I do not identify a minimal set of relevantly informative

⁹For an overview of different ways to flesh out the luck component in luck egalitarianism, see Lippert-Rasmussen (2023, Section 3 to 5).

properties possessed by all those who are lazy. Also, the distinction between instrumental irrationality and work laziness that I will draw involves concepts of laziness at different levels of specificity that are useful for quite different purposes, and this raises a question about what the organising principle of the taxonomy underpinning this article is.

Is this a problem? In a familiar Wittgenstenian view, some concepts are family resemblance concepts. No conceptual core is shared by all the items correctly classified as, say, play, even though, as with the appearance of different members of the same biological family, there is a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing between different forms of play (Wittgenstein 2009, §66–67). My contention is that something similar is true of laziness, though one probably important similarity linking many forms of laziness is the absence of a disposition to expend effort over an extended period with the aim of achieving a future goal, the achievement of which is considered best overall. Moreover, as indicated, an organising principle does shape the next four sections. Laziness is a characteristic that people have in their capacity as agents, and in a simple understanding of action, actions are caused in the right way by beliefs and desires. My taxonomy implies that laziness can be located in three components (what one does, what one is not motivated to do, and what one believes).¹⁰ However, I do not claim to have considered all ordinary language senses of ‘laziness’. I do think the four senses below are the most important from a luck egalitarian perspective. They are the senses luck egalitarians who make negative pronouncements about what is owed to the lazy are likely to have in mind.¹¹

Instrumental-irrationality laziness

I turn, then, to the four senses in which someone can be described as lazy, the first two of which pertain to what one does or fails to do (Sections 2 and 3). Laziness of the first sort is exhibited by both Cohen’s shoppers at Fortnum’s and the grasshopper in Aesop’s fable. It involves a particular form of instrumental irrationality:

¹⁰There are conative and self-deception forms of work laziness analogous to the action-focused form of laziness that I introduce in Section 3. E.g. ‘X is work-related, *conative lazy* if, often, when X 1) believes that φ -ing is a work-related activity, but 2) is also disproportionately motivated not to exert the effort involved in φ -ing now because of the work-related exertion this involves’. In the interest of space, however, the forms of conative and self-deception laziness that I focus on are analogous to the instrumental-irrationality lazy form of action-focused laziness introduced in Section 2.

¹¹I also claim that none of the four taxa introduced below is reducible to any one of the others and, thus, that a taxonomy with fewer taxa would not be fruitful.

X is instrumental-irrationality lazy if,¹² often, when X 1) believes that φ -ing now is better all things considered,¹³ and 2) believes that φ -ing will involve making an effort, 3) X nevertheless fails to φ now because X does not have, or fails to mobilise, the motivation required to φ now despite not satisfying any standard excusing condition.

By 'better all things considered', I mean best from a time-neutral perspective. It is the fact that the individual has no (mobilisable) motivation to make an effort now to bring about the best outcome overall that makes this form of irrationality a form of laziness. This deficiency does not mean the individual lacks motivation more generally – the grasshopper might be highly motivated to play the fiddle all summer. 'Standard excusing condition' I shall leave unspecified, but I intend it to include, among other things, the state of being depressed.

Instrumental-irrationality laziness is related to, and yet distinct from, a more unreflective form of laziness:

X is desirability lazy if, often, when X 1**) ('1**' because 1* appears in note 13 above) finds it desirable to φ (without having any view about whether φ -ing is better all things considered), and 2) believes that φ -ing will involve making an effort, 3) X nevertheless fails to φ now because X does not have, or fails to mobilise, the motivation required to φ now despite not satisfying any standard excusing condition.

Sometimes, when people are criticised for being lazy, the charge is that they are desirability lazy, not that they are instrumental-irrationality lazy. Perhaps the grasshopper, being merely desirability lazy, simply fails to think through the potential hardships of the winter. However, in cases where an individual X is so unreflective that X has no thoughts at all about what is best overall or what is desirable, the charge that X is instrumental-irrationality lazy (as opposed to being simply thoughtless or a wanton) need not stick.¹⁴

One can be instrumentally irrational without being lazy – and, indeed, by being the very opposite of lazy. One can be instrumentally irrational by compulsively putting too much effort into preparing for the winter, thereby failing, miserably, to enjoy the summer. Perhaps some ants are

¹²According to Ryle (1949, 85, 101–104, 169), laziness is a disposition of a person to behave in a certain way. An act (or omission) can be lazy in the derivative sense that it is a manifestation of the agent's laziness. Strictly speaking, one can φ often without being disposed to φ – e.g. owing to special circumstances. I set aside this complication.

¹³Or alternatively, often, when 1*) the evidence available to X implies that φ -ing now is better all things considered.

¹⁴It might stick if, in addition to being extremely unreflective in the indicated sense, X is also very passive (see Section 4 on conative laziness).

like that. Theirs is not the failure to stop and think about tomorrow but the failure of never stopping thinking about tomorrow, even when it would be better to focus on pleasures of the present:¹⁵

X is the *reverse* of instrumental-irrational lazy – call it *instrumental-irrationality hyperactive* – if, often, when X 1) knows that φ -ing now is worse all things considered, even though φ -ing later will make X better off overall, and 2) believes that not φ -ing now will involve making an effort (to suppress his or her urge to attempt to improve his or her future prospects), 3) X nevertheless does φ now because X does not have, or fails to mobilise, the motivation to suppress X's motivation to φ now despite not satisfying any standard excusing condition.

Probably, the form of instrumental-irrationality laziness that has received most attention is imprudence laziness:

X is *imprudence lazy* if, often, when X 1***) believes that φ -ing now is better for X (i.e. makes X's life go better as a whole, all things considered), 2) and believes that φ -ing will involve making an effort, 3) X nevertheless does not φ now because X does not have, or fails to mobilise, the motivation required to φ now despite not satisfying any standard excusing condition.¹⁶

Imprudence laziness is a form of instrumental-irrationality laziness that arises when one's goal is to make one's life as good as possible. Since most people have that goal, albeit typically alongside others that trump it at times, imprudence laziness resonates with us. Indeed, presumably both of Cohen's examples are examples of imprudence laziness (as well as being examples of instrumental-irrationality laziness).

Psychological egoists, who hold that each individual is only ever motivated to do things that promote his or her self-interest, might suggest that there can be no other of instrumental-irrationality laziness than imprudence laziness since the only thing that ever motivates us is self-interest. It is fanciful, they might say, to suppose that there are people who are instrumental-irrationality lazy but not imprudence lazy.

What do we owe to those who are instrumental-irrationality lazy? From a luck egalitarian perspective, the question here is whether people can be

¹⁵Bertrand Russell (1932) thinks that this is part of the problem of overvaluing work: 'We think too much of production and too little of consumption. One result is that we attach too little importance to enjoyment and simple happiness, and that we do not judge production by the pleasure that it gives to the consumer'. Lafargue adopts a similar view: 'The philosophers of antiquity taught contempt for work, that degradation of the free man, the poets sang of idleness, that gift from the Gods' (Lafargue 1883; cf. O'Connor 2018).

¹⁶For completeness, I should note that like instrumental-irrationality laziness, imprudence laziness has an unreflective cousin, i.e. *desirability-imprudence laziness*, where 1***) is replaced by 1****): often, when X finds it desirable to φ (without having any view about whether φ -ing is better for X all things considered).

held responsible for irrationally failing to make an effort such that justice does not require compensating these lazy people as opposed to non-lazy people who were in a similar situation and who did make an effort but where these were simply unsuccessful for unpredictable reasons. Offhand, someone who ends up worse off through instrumental-irrationality laziness is worse off as a result of their own 'choice or fault', i.e. they are responsible for being worse off. Hence, it is not unjust that they are worse off.

However, this inference merely highlights the fact that the simple luck egalitarian credo over-simplifies things. First, there is no reason why instrumental-irrationality lazy people should be treated differently from those who are instrumental-irrationality hyperactive. Both act in ways that foreseeably make them worse off (assuming they have a self-interested goal). Hence, laziness drops out of the picture: it no longer appears to be the thing that is relevant to what we owe to those who are instrumental-irrationality lazy.

Second, it is unclear that those who are instrumental-irrationality lazy can always be held fully responsible for their laziness. As Arneson (1997, 332) puts it:

Even if we have freedom of the will, empirical helps and hindrances to exercising it virtuously fall randomly in different amounts on different persons. Discovering good values, making sensible choices, and putting one's choices into action will be variably easy and costly for individuals depending on their choice-making and choice-following abilities as fixed by genetic and social inheritance.

Hence, it could well be that a person displaying instrumental-irrationality laziness for reasons for which they bear only a reduced responsibility has fewer choice-making and choice-following abilities than a better-off person displaying non-instrumental-irrationality laziness. If so, from a luck egalitarian perspective, the former should be given priority over the latter. Given the cards that those who are instrumental-irrationality lazy were dealt, they did better than someone who was non-lazy.

This is not to deny that sometimes those who are instrumental-irrationality lazy could easily have acted otherwise and, thus, can justifiably be expected to bear the consequences of their laziness. Poor people are often portrayed as lazy – either in the instrumental-irrationality sense or as work lazy (more on this in the next section). To the extent that instrumental-irrationality laziness is affected by genetic and social inheritance in the way indicated by Arneson, that surely makes miserly social policies

harder to justify.¹⁷ However, from a luck egalitarian perspective, there is no reason to think that this is the typical form instrumental irrationality takes. Indeed:

on the average we would expect that impoverished members of society tend to be cursed with choice-making and choice-following deficits, so even if their degree of conformity to accepted standards of conduct is less than average, one cannot infer that their deservingness, all things considered, is less than average. (Arneson 1997, 332)

Suppose laziness results in ‘choice-making and choice-following deficits’, and assume that one is not responsible for one’s laziness. In Arneson’s view, the question then concerns the degree to which one’s laziness detracts from the extent to which one can justifiably be held responsible for the outcome of one’s typically deficient choices.¹⁸ Moreover, choices that make badly off people worse off than others can be the best choices in the option sets of those people. For example, ‘an individual who chooses unemployment may be making the best of a set of bad options in a situation in which society has the obligation to improve his option set’ (Arneson 1997, 338).

Work laziness

Another sense of laziness – work laziness – pertains to what the agent does. Work laziness is at least as salient as instrumental-irrationality laziness both in the luck egalitarian literature and public discourse on laziness even though, in a sense, it is a much more specific notion. It can be defined as follows:

X is work lazy if 1) *X* disproportionately prefers non-work activities over work activities, and 2), for that reason, spends inappropriately small amounts of time on work and inappropriately large amounts of time on non-work activities.¹⁹

In *In Praise of Idleness*, Bertrand Russell advances ‘arguments for laziness’. In effect, what he means by that is arguments favouring a positive

¹⁷This is not to say that only outcome equality will do. After all, in the quoted passage, Arneson is assuming that we have free will and, thus, presumably that differences in ‘choice-making and choice-following abilities’ are not only a matter of ‘genetic and social inheritance’.

¹⁸To the extent that one is not responsible for one’s character traits (as, plausibly, one typically is not), it would run counter to the moral intuition underpinning luck egalitarianism if the basis of moral deservingness were character traits like laziness. However, the view that the moral deservingness of one’s choices matters morally is consistent with that basic intuition, e.g. if the desert basis is one’s actions. Compatibilists hold that one can be responsible for an action even if it is partly the result of the one’s character and one is not responsible for the latter (cf. Arneson 1999).

¹⁹The person who is the opposite of work lazy has a name, of course: the workaholic.

reevaluation of consumption and leisure so that they are held to have greater value than work on the one hand and a reduction of the working day on the other. It is also noteworthy that 'industrious' is a very apt antonym of 'lazy'. Finally, we encounter the notion of work laziness in the extended discussions of beach bums by luck egalitarians and their critics (see Introduction) and Cohen's fable of the ants (who are industrious) and the grasshopper (who disproportionately prefers playing the fiddle over the arduous work of securing food and shelter for the winter).

What exactly it is to be work lazy depends on several things: how one cuts the distinction between work and non-work activities; what it is to disproportionately prefer the latter over the former; and what amounts of time it is inappropriate to spend on work and non-work activities. All these issues are tricky. First, it would be odd to describe someone who spends considerable time looking after and caring for his or her own (or other people's) children unpaid as work lazy. More generally, many unpaid activities – housework is housework after all – have a claim to be such that one cannot be accused of being work shy if one spends a significant amount of time on them. Conversely, some paid work is such that spending many hours a week on it plausibly is being lazy: it makes perfect sense to say that one prefers one job to another, or to taxing childcare at home, for example, because one is lazy. That said, when people accuse someone of being work shy, they typically associate work with activities that are unpleasant because they involve exertion and non-work with activities or forms of inactivity that are pleasant and require no exertion such as basking in the sun. While work and non-work do differ in this way *typically*, there are many exceptions on both sides. Some academics really enjoy giving a talk. For them, doing this may involve no more exertion than chatting to a friend. Some sport hobbyists, such as ice-wall climbers (I would imagine), put themselves through more in the way of unpleasantness and physical strain than is ever encountered in most work activities.

It is also tricky – the second issue mentioned above – to say when, exactly, one's indifference curve for work and non-work activities expresses a disproportionate preference for non-work over work. Presumably, as one's number of working hours increases, one will reach a number of working hours such that preferring an additional hour of non-work over an additional hour of work expresses no disproportionality of this kind. Plausibly, one might think that what that number is varies from person to person and with the external rewards of one's work (most obviously,

remuneration) and non-work, and that further criteria come into play in determining what the number is (more on this in the next paragraph). However, the disproportionality requirement is intended to imply that the mere fact that one prefers non-work over work activities over a limited period of time does not imply that one is work lazy.

Finally, it is not easy to say what an appropriate number of working hours is. Is the benchmark what is normal in the relevant society so that being work lazy has a significant conventional element? Laziness in a society where the Protestant work ethic is strong would then involve fewer hours of non-work than laziness in a Malibu surfer community. Or is the standard what is good for the person in question? If that were so, the constitutionally work averse could presumably work quite few hours without being lazy. Hence, I suspect that, typically, when people criticise someone for being work lazy, they have in mind moral standards for how many hours one ought to work. This means that when we criticise someone for being work shy, we are implying that they have a moral fault, such as the fault of not being self-reliant or not contributing to the common good. We are not implying that they are irrational as we would if we accused them of instrumental-irrationality laziness.

In any reasonable analysis of the three components commented on above, it will follow that one can be instrumental-irrationality lazy without being work lazy and work lazy without being instrumental-irrationality lazy. People who enjoy their work (e.g. prolific writers) and are introverts, and who need to mobilise motivation to socialise might be hardworking and instrumental-irrationality lazy. They know that socialising now will be better for them overall, but attendance at a social engagement in prospect requires them to make an effort, right now, to mobilise their motivation to socialise instead of taking the easy way out. In declining to make that effort, they knowingly fail to bring about the best outcome overall while enjoying the short-sighted benefits of writing. Conversely, people who are work averse and thrive on non-work activities (e.g. surfers at Malibu beach) might be instrumentally rational when they decide to work for a month as a personal trainer and then spend the rest of the year surfing while using up their very modest savings – thereby spending, let us suppose, an inappropriately limited amount of time working.

Interestingly, it is unclear what we should say from the luck egalitarian perspective about worse-off work-lazy people. In thinking about this, it is important to start by highlighting an assumption often made by philosophers discussing this and related questions. This is the assumption that

work activities benefit other people whereas non-work activities do not. Rawls' adjustment of his list of primary goods to include leisure in order to cut off the potential implication that 'those who surf all day off Malibu' need not support themselves and can rely on public funds is surely motivated by the thought that by surfing all day off Malibu, one does not benefit others (recall footnote 7). On the debatable assumption that we owe more, morally, to people who benefit others than we do to people who could do so but do not, e.g. in terms of access to public funds,²⁰ it follows that we owe less to people who are work lazy than we do to people without that fault.

There are at least two problems with that inference, however, one of which arises specifically from a luck egalitarian perspective. First, while it may be true that in general, work activities benefit others and non-work activities do not, there are ways of cutting the difference between work and non-work entailing that some work activities do not benefit others while some non-work activities do have that effect. For instance, working in a lab that produces heroin for sale on the street does not benefit people, and looking after grandchildren unpaid benefits others.²¹ Hence, if the contours of our duties to others should reflect the degree to which those others themselves benefit others, we owe less to some people who are not work lazy and more to people who are.

The second problem – the one that arises specifically within the standard luck egalitarian perspective – is that what luck egalitarians are concerned about is whether people are worse off through no fault or choice of their own. This concern does not align well with the concern to ensure that benefits reflect the degree to which people benefit others. Someone who is not work lazy because they work a lot and benefit others hugely, knowing full well that they would be better off working less, might be worse off precisely as a result of their decision to work so much. In that way, they would fall outside the scope of the luck egalitarian compensatory concerns. Conversely, someone who is worse off because they consistently chose to engage only in non-work activities that seemed to them to promote their interests as much as possible, albeit at very significant cost to others, but turned out not to promote their interests after all

²⁰IIndeed, the idea that freeloaders should not be rewarded at the expense of the hardworking resonates across the political spectrum' (Olson 2020, ix). Similarly, Jon Elster objects to basic income that it 'completely lacks the potential for being ... wedded to a conception of justice ... It goes against a widely accepted notion of justice: it is unfair for able-bodied people to live off the labour of others' (Elster 1986, 709, 719). For some challenges to the norm of reciprocity, see Arneson (1997).

²¹As should be clear from the preceding text, here I am not taking issue with those who would classify looking after children as unpaid work.

will fall within the scope of the luck egalitarian compensatory concerns. The possibility of imprudent moral choices – e.g. working hard for the benefit of others and to the detriment of oneself (see Arneson (1997, 329) on virtuous imprudence) – can be seen as either a counterexample to luck egalitarianism or a reason to amend it to accommodate intuitions about agents who harm themselves in making morally desirable choices and intuitions about agents who benefit themselves making morally impermissible choices harming others (Eyal 2007; Lippert-Rasmussen 2015, 68, 199; Temkin 2003, 144). The amendment response is a minority position within luck egalitarianism, and most luck egalitarians are silent on whether being worse off through imprudent moral choices is a cause for compensation and seem committed to denying that such people have a claim to luck egalitarian compensation (Arneson 1989; Cohen 1989; Dworkin 1981; see also the references in Eyal 2007, 2–3, note 1).²²

More generally, in standard cases, being work lazy is in some ways comparable to having expensive tastes. ‘Standard cases’ because – so I conjecture – being strongly motivated to avoid work implies that, other things being equal, one needs more resources than others to realise the same level of well-being.²³ As the debate between Cohen and Dworkin attests, luck egalitarians differ over whether people with expensive preferences are due compensation. By implication, they will very probably differ over whether work-lazy people are due compensation (Cohen 2004; Dworkin 2000, 285–299).

Part of this disagreement is rooted in disagreement about whether the currency of luck egalitarian justice is resources or, alternatively, welfare or both. In Cohen’s considered view – equal access to advantage – both welfare and resource deficits are of concern from a luck egalitarian view. Hence, the preference-frustration consumption-wise of work-lazy people who work very little is of concern from a luck egalitarian perspective.²⁴ Moreover, according to Cohen, welfare deficits due to the frustration of expensive tastes merits compensation when

²²Pluralist luck egalitarians might think there are other reasons for compensating such people.

²³An example of a non-standard case is one in which the work-lazy person finds more enjoyment in non-work-related activities such as hanging out with friends than people generally do. In such cases, work-lazy people might have cheap preferences overall.

²⁴Of course, if they enjoy non-work activities so much that they need very little consumption to make them as well off as the non-work lazy, they are not worse off in a luck egalitarian sense and, thus, arguably do not merit compensation. However, if it is simply the case that they strongly dislike work relative to the non-work lazy and do not particularly like non-work activities relative to the non-work lazy, assuming the possibility of interpersonal welfare comparisons, their level of welfare might be significantly lower than that of the non-work lazy even if they do what they prefer, i.e. not work very much.

the preference bearer identifies with the preference and, thus, cannot reasonably be held responsible for it (Cohen 2004, 7). Hence, in his view, work-lazy people whose work laziness reflects a preference for non-work-related activities with which they identify are due compensation. Thus, at least one kind of work lazy, e.g. worse-off Malibu surfers, should receive state benefits in the interest of luck egalitarian equality.

Conative laziness

In different ways, laziness in the two previous senses is matter of what one does. I now move on to a notion of laziness that reflects one's motivation:

X is conative lazy if, often, when X 1) believes that φ -ing now is better all things considered, and 2) X is also disproportionately motivated not to exert the effort involved in φ -ing now because of the exertion this involves.²⁵

The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines laziness as 'the fact of being unwilling to work or be active'.²⁶ One can be unwilling to do something, e.g. exert oneself to do what is best, or work hard, and nevertheless do it, in which case one is not lazy in virtue of one's actions – perhaps quite to the contrary. This much comes out in Roland Barthes' self-reprimand for failing to find time to be lazy. He strongly aspires to the (imagined) idleness of his Paris childhood, but he cannot bring himself to be in that state (Barthes 1985, 345). For many people, doing certain unpleasant things now – typically, the things they do regularly (jogging is a good example) – in the interest of future gains becomes routine, and even if doing these things initially requires them to pull themselves together, acting rationally despite temptations to the contrary, it is not that difficult to follow the routine. The conative lazy are not like this. For them, jogging never becomes a 'this is what I do this time of the day on Wednesday and Sunday afternoons' thing. It forever remains a

²⁵A particularly acute form of conative laziness occurs where one is motivated to do very little, and this is not explained by one's being depressed. This form corresponds well to Rousseau's description of human beings' naturally *paresseux* condition in the state of nature (2017, 272): in the state of nature, 'man ... lives solely in order to sleep, to vegetate, to remain motionless; he can scarcely decide to go through the motions required to keep from dying of hunger'. Less acute forms of conative laziness arise where, after a period in which one does what one deems best with little temptation to do otherwise, the motivation to avoid further exertions is boosted considerably until one's willpower has regenerated itself; or where the prospect of future exertion to do what is best drains the agent of desire until that time arrives.

²⁶<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/laziness#:~:text=%2F'le%C9%AAzin%C9%99s%2F-,%2F'le%C9%AAzin%C9%99s%2F,to%20work%20or%20be%20active> [Accessed 21 September 2023].

struggle, which is what the term ‘disproportionately’ indicates.²⁷ They must set themselves to do what is best and overcome strong temptations not to do it.²⁸ Those who fail to mobilise the willpower required are called ‘couch potatoes’ or something similar, while those who succeed in doing so may end up acting in ways no different from those who are not lazy at all.²⁹ Plausibly, Cohen’s example of the worse-off people who ‘buy their food at Fortnum’s because they cannot be bothered to walk up the Berwick Street market’ (1989, 911) involves conative-lazy people.

It is natural to describe the difference between conatively lazy people who overcome their motivational limitations and exercise and conatively lazy people who fail to exercise because they fail to mobilise the willpower to do what they believe they should by saying that the latter, but not the former, are lazy. However, even if, in an important sense, the former are not lazy, we can understand what they mean if they say that unlike joggers of the first kind, they are conative lazy, jogging-wise: they find it hard to motivate themselves to exert effort even if, eventually, they always succeed in doing so. Bill Gates prefers ‘a lazy person to do a hard job. Because a lazy person will find an easy way to do it’.³⁰ Presumably, what he has in mind is people who are conative lazy and not instrumental-irrational lazy. Such people manage to do what is instrumentally rational precisely because they are lazy. Had they not been lazy, they would not have been sufficiently alert to better ways of doing things. We might not think of them as lazy action-wise – after all, they always get the job done. But in response to our characterisation of them, individuals of this type might say: ‘Yes, I know. I get things done, but I am lazy by inclination ...’. This conative-lazy person is like the Kantian figure with strong inclinations contrary to duty who nevertheless does what she is morally obliged to do as a result of her strong sense of

²⁷As with work laziness, the disproportionality here can be cashed out in relation to a statistical norm, in this case pertaining to how strongly people generally are motivated not to act in ways they believe to be best overall.

²⁸We can stipulate that once they started jogging, they will find it as (dis)pleasurable as those for whom jogging has become a routine.

²⁹The couch potato I have in mind is someone who realises it is best for him not to stay on the couch but finds it hard to mobilise energy to do what he believes is best for him. This raises a question about what to say about the ‘stoic’ couch potato, i.e. someone who merely has a few, and weak, desires, and who accordingly thinks it is best for him to stay on the couch. If his being in that state is a result of his Stoicism-informed character formation, it seems misleading to label him lazy. But what if he just *happens to have* few, or weak, desires? First, that certainly is not the sort of laziness – if indeed it is that – that luck egalitarians typically have had in mind. Second, perhaps welfarist luck egalitarians would be inclined to compensate this type of lazy person on the grounds that, other things being equal, and setting aside some complexities regarding interpersonal welfare comparisons, his welfare is lower than that of people with more, and stronger, satisfied desires.

³⁰<https://www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/bill-gates-says-lazy-people-make-the-best-employees/376746>.

moral duty; or the introvert who has schooled himself to make conversation and socialise so successfully that no one – except perhaps him when, exhausted, he withdraws to his solitude – notices his true personality.

The conative lazy need not be lazy in either of the two previous senses. They need not be instrumental-irrational lazy because, as just indicated, they may be able always to mobilise enough willpower to do what is best overall at any given point in time. They need not be work lazy, either. They may discipline themselves to work an appropriate amount of time and have no disproportionate preference for non-work activity over work.

What should luck egalitarians say about worse-off conative-lazy people? To answer this question, let us distinguish, among the conative lazy, between those who manage to do what they are disinclined to do (i.e. manage to mobilise the willpower to exert the energy that they think it is best to exert: the strong-willed conative lazy) and those who do not. It is striking that in some of its welfarist versions, luck egalitarianism encourages us to compensate the strong-willed conative lazy. Luck egalitarians are divided over whether the currency of justice is resources or welfare (Lippert-Rasmussen 2015, 77–112). Let us assume three things: the welfarist view is correct; summoning willpower and monitoring one's actions over an extended period in order to stick to a routine is taxing and reduces one's level of well-being;³¹ and people have varying degrees of control over whether they are conative lazy. Under these assumptions, luck egalitarianism appears to imply that the strong-willed, conative lazy are due compensation relative to those who are not in proportion to the degree to which they lack control over the degree to which they are conative lazy, all other things being equal.³² Hence, from an unexceptional welfarist luck egalitarian perspective, more, rather than less, might be owed to strong-willed people who are conative lazy and worse off than is owed to those who are worse off but not conative lazy. Indeed, in this view, there is a *pro tanto* reason for the state to redistribute to benefit the involuntarily conatively lazy who work hard and, as a result, through no fault or choice of their own, live lives that are worse than that of others welfare-wise.³³

³¹This need not be the case. Some people enjoy having to focus on something repetitive.

³²People can have indirect control over whether they are conative lazy and might, for that reason, not be entitled to luck egalitarian compensation for acting rationally despite the temptation of focusing on immediate benefits and ignoring future greater benefits.

³³According to some luck egalitarians, e.g. G. A. Cohen (2008), luck egalitarianism is a view about what (distributive) justice is, not a view about what sort of (distributive) political rights and duties people should have (though it bears of what the correct view of this issue is).

It is less clear what resourcist luck egalitarians should say. On the one hand, the conative lazy are likely to have more of the internal resource of willpower. This speaks in favour of their *not* being entitled to compensation – perhaps the reverse! On the other hand, they also have what can arguably be described as an internal resource deficiency since they cannot semi-automatically do what is best overall, suggesting that they *are* due compensation.³⁴

There is an additional reason why involuntarily strong-willed, conative-lazy people might be due compensation from a luck egalitarian point of view. Suppose we accept an objective list account of well-being in which achievement, in the form of doing the right things for the right reason, is an important component of well-being (cf. Parfit 1986, 499). In this view, other things being equal, conative-lazy, strong-willed people are worse off than those who do the right things without being conative lazy, assuming at least that they are not responsible for their conative laziness. The conative lazy act in the right way as that is dictated by instrumental rationality, prudence, and morality, but typically, they do so for the wrong reasons – which is to say, they do not do what is right because it is right but, in large part, because they are able to summon various auxiliary motivations (McDowell 1979, 331–332).

This leaves us with the question of what luck egalitarians should say about the conative lazy who do not mobilise the willpower to do the right thing because they have strong motivations to the contrary and end up worse off as a result. The correct luck egalitarian view of these people depends on whether the relevant conative deficiency is a result of the agent's choice or fault. Plausibly, one's level of energy is not significantly under one's direct control, though it is to a significantly greater degree under one's indirect control. Plausibly, however, many conative-lazy agents are not lazy because of choices they have made, and – considering Arneson's point about 'empirical helps and hindrances' – especially not in such a way that it is morally justified for them to be worse off. Can it be said that they are at fault for being conative lazy? My suspicion is that we can reasonably impute such a fault, given (and in the sense) that it is desirable not to be conative lazy. However, the mere fact that some property is a fault in a purely aretaic sense does not suffice to make it a fault in a luck egalitarian sense. For it to be the latter, it needs to be relevantly tied to the worse-off person's agency.

³⁴In a Dworkinian view, it all depends on whether the conatively lazy would prefer not to be conatively lazy (Dworkin 2000, 292–293). Presumably, the stoic with few desires prefers the character trait that he has cultivated and, thus, is not worse off on that account in Dworkin's view.

Hence, I suspect that at least in some cases, the conative lazy who are worse off are due compensation according to luck egalitarianism.

Self-deception laziness

Let us now move on to the fourth, final, and probably most complex form of laziness. The focus of this form of laziness is motivated beliefs regarding what it is best to do all things considered:

X is self-deceivingly lazy if when 1) *X* believes that φ -ing now is not better all things considered, and 2) *X* believes that φ -ing will involve making an effort, and 3) φ -ing now is better all things considered,³⁵ and 4) *X* often does not φ now because he has the belief described in 1), and moreover, 5) *X* has that belief because he wishes to avoid making an effort now and that if he adopts the belief that φ -ing now is not better all things considered, he need not see himself as someone who is failing to do what is better all things considered by not φ -ing now.

For present purposes, we can understand self-deception as follows. An agent has no evidence to believe that p (or overall evidence to believe that not p). Despite this, they believe that p because they want it to be the case that (they believe that) p , and this want causes them to believe that p in the right sort of way (Deweese-Boyd 2016; compare Statman 1997, 58). This delineation of self-deception needs to be refined to accommodate the case where the evidence supports p , but the self-deceiver has taken care to ensure that they only come across evidence that supports p (consider vain people who surround themselves with those who will confirm their flattering self-image) (Statman 1997, 61).

Arguably, much laziness is self-deception laziness. One believes that if one were to try to φ , one would be unlikely to succeed. Even so, one *would* believe of someone else in a similar position – and correctly, given the evidence one has – that they would successfully φ if they tried to φ . One overestimates the unpleasantness of the means necessary to achieve a valuable end and falsely concludes that this outweighs the benefits of the end. Even so, one would be willing to paternalistically impose the same unpleasantness on someone else in the interest of securing the valuable end for that person. Or one holds a pessimistic view about the value of achieving the end (even though not so long ago, when one thought it was beyond reach, one valued it much more

³⁵Alternatively, 3*) the evidence available to *X* implies that φ -ing now is better all things considered.

highly). One does these things with an eye to avoiding the conclusion that now is the time to make an effort to ϕ since that would be best overall. In each case, the suspicion of self-deception lurks. The suspicion may well be that the motivation underpinning the self-deception is a form of laziness.

The self-deceivingly lazy can act in an instrumentally rational way given the beliefs they deceive themselves into having. When they do, they evade the charge of instrumental-irrationality laziness. Typically, however, they have evidence available to them that should make them think differently about which action is best overall. Accordingly, to the extent that irrationality (of the relevant sort) can depend on failing to form beliefs that one has good evidence for, perhaps many cases of self-deceiving laziness are also cases of instrumental-irrationality laziness in this broader sense.³⁶ It seems the self-deceivingly lazy need not be work lazy. Perhaps they only deceive themselves outside work. Nor need they be conative lazy. They would not be so if, without conflicting motivations, they were to uniformly succeed in doing effortlessly what they think is best overall – after they have tricked themselves into thinking that only things that do not require an effort now are best done overall. They would not be the latter if they were to decline to make an effort.

What are those who are worse off as a result of their self-deceiving laziness owed according to luck egalitarianism? Interestingly, where, as a result of one's self-deception, one believes that one is doing what is best all things considered, prudentially speaking, and for that reason ends up worse off, one will, on the face of it, have the same claim to compensation as someone who, for good reason and without self-deception, falsely believes that not making an effort is best all things considered and therefore does not do so and ends up being worse off as a consequence. The fact that one is lazy in the first kind of case and one is not in the latter makes no difference to the claims for compensation. To the extent that the person in the first kind of case exercises control over their own self-deception, things might be different, however. Plausibly, the presence of control might weaken this person's claim to compensation.

Arguably, typically people have some degree of control over whether they deceive themselves. Self-deceivers might negligently – and knowingly so – refrain from double checking their reasoning, leading them to conclude that it is best, overall, not to make an effort. Or they might

³⁶If we substitute 1*) (on which see footnote 13) for 1) in the definition of instrumental-irrationality laziness given earlier, self-deception laziness, based on 3*) replacing 3), involves instrumental-irrationality laziness.

be the sort of people who – though they are aware of their dismal track record in forming accurate beliefs about the best thing to do – overall, in situations like this, have failed to adopt simple rules of cognitive discipline (Bishop and Trout 2005). Still, given that self-deception works precisely because the operation of our minds is in many important respects largely opaque to us, arguably, the contrast between what we owe to many people who are worse off because they are self-deceptively lazy compared to similar non-self-deceptively lazy persons is less stark than much luck egalitarian literature might lead one to think.

To strengthen this claim, note that to the extent that the self-deceptively lazy people's self-deception is a constitutive part of their status as worse off – e.g. because knowledge of one's situation is an item on an objective list of well-being, and self-deception reduces their possession of this good – in one respect, they might even be owed more than the non-self-deceptively lazy.³⁷ On the assumption that the currency of luck egalitarian justice is well-being, and that well-being is to be understood along the lines of an objective list where the achievement of knowledge and, especially, self-knowledge is an important objective prudential value, self-deception involves believing something irrationally. Thus, assuming knowledge requires justified belief, failing to achieve self-knowledge – given that, arguably, this form of knowledge is particularly important for a person's well-being – self-deception makes a person significantly worse off. Hence, other things being equal, and even setting aside the typically negative consequences of their self-deception, there is a luck egalitarian case for compensating the self-deceptively lazy to the extent that they are not responsible for their self-deception. Something I leave for further discussion is what exactly that degree typically is. I would conjecture that people probably fill out the whole spectrum from not at all responsible to fully responsible.

Conclusion

This completes my survey of various forms of laziness and of what claims those who are lazy in these ways have on others from the luck egalitarian perspective. One aim has been to advance our understanding of laziness

³⁷Griffin (1986, 62). In outlining theories of well-being, Parfit (1986, 499) discusses the badness of being deceived by others. An objective list theorist might reasonably think that being deceived by oneself is even worse for the person deceived (the deceiver!) than the lack of knowledge resulting from deception by others – even if there are disanalogies between intrapersonal and interpersonal deception (Mele 1987, 8–11).

by distinguishing between importantly different kinds. A second aim was to show that even in a theory of justice, which, offhand, one would not expect to be particularly generous towards the lazy – luck egalitarianism – it is unclear that those who are worse off because of their laziness should always place their faith in charity, or compassion, rather than justice. In some, but not all, cases, being lazy could well ground a claim to compensation rather than forming a ground for withholding it – e.g. because various forms of laziness detract from the distributive position of the lazy person and because lazy people are only sometimes responsible for the sub-optimal acts of theirs resulting from their laziness. Also, from a luck egalitarian perspective, the distributive position of the worse-off lazy seems no different from that of worse-off instrumentally irrational hyperactive people and workaholics, suggesting that to the extent that luck egalitarians have an issue with compensatory duties to the lazy, it is irrationality and not laziness as such that defeats such duties.

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