

GET A JOB AND PAY YOUR TAXES! WHAT UTOPOPHILES MUST SAY TO THE WESTERN POOR

BY JASON BRENNAN*

Abstract: G. A. Cohen and David Estlund have recently defended utopophilia against utopophobia. They argue we should not dumb down the requirements of ethics or justice to accommodate people's motivational failings. The fact that certain people predictably will not do the right thing does not imply they are unable to do so, or that they are not obligated to do so. Utopophiles often defend left-wing ideas; for instance, Cohen argues that people's unwillingness to do what socialism requires does not imply that socialism is bad, but instead that people are bad. This essay shows that utopophiles must also endorse certain "conservative" conclusions, such as that most poor adults in the developed West are obligated to act more prudently, get jobs, become net taxpayers, avoid having children they cannot afford, and act to avoid needing welfare or assistance.

KEY WORDS: utopophobia, utopophilia, duty to work, prudence, motivation, self-interest, charity

In recent work, G. A. Cohen and David Estlund critique the moral complacency that they believe plagues political philosophy. They argue that philosophers and others make improper concessions to human nature. Everyone agrees that "ought implies can," but they should not conclude that "won't implies can't." People could behave well, though predictably they won't because they don't want to. But the fact they don't want to rarely means they can't or shouldn't. Rather than curving or dumbing down morality, we should conclude that people are morally bad and that most societies fall short of justice.¹

Estlund refers to positions that reduce the requirements of ethics or justice to accommodate people's poor motivations and predictable moral failings as "utopophobic" or instances of "utopohobia."² I will call Estlund and Cohen's own position "utopophilia" and refer to them as "utopophiles."

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Competing Interests: The author declares none.

¹ To be clear, Cohen explicitly endorses this position. David Estlund generally tries to avoid making substantive claims about what justice requires, and so remains officially agnostic about how demanding justice and morality actually are.

² See David Estlund, *Democratic Authority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); David Estlund, "Human Nature and the Limits (If Any) of Political Philosophy," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 39 (2011): 207–37; David Estlund, "Utopophobia," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*

doi:10.1017/S026505252300002X

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They both regard utopian theorizing as primary or fundamental. Estlund defends utopian theorizing at length while Cohen actively engages in it.

Utopophile arguments are often employed to defend left-wing, socialist, or progressive moral ideas. For instance, G. A. Cohen argues that people's unwillingness to live by socialist rules shows that people are bad, not that socialism is bad.³ He says that "justice is not hostage to human weakness and insufficiency."⁴ Peter Singer and Peter Unger argue that the fact that people are unwilling to donate—to a point of marginal disutility—to efforts to feed the poor does not relieve them of any such duty.⁵ Joseph Carens argues that people's unwillingness to share profits equally across society does not show they lack any such duty.⁶

This essay shows that utopophilia also supports ideas associated with conservative thought. Utopophiles should also agree to the following claims: Most people have an obligation to make choices that significantly reduce the chances they will require various kinds of welfare or social insurance. They have obligations to make choices that ensure they make enough income to pay taxes toward public goods, publicly provided goods, and welfare or charity programs for others who genuinely cannot work and genuinely cannot make better choices. Such choices include getting jobs (even bad ones), buying certain forms of insurance, investing for their retirements, and avoiding risky sexual practices that could produce children they cannot afford. Most poor people in the West are instead obligated to work and to ensure that they are in a position to pay their fair share of taxes. They should aim to avoid *consuming* an unfair share of tax-subsidized welfare and instead aim to present themselves as net taxpayers during their prime working years.

If, as Cohen and Estlund argue, we should not dumb down the requirements of justice to accommodate people's moral failings, lack of motivation, or bad contrary motivations, this applies across the board. The Cohen-Estlund view makes demands of the rich and poor alike and tolerates excuses only in special cases. Many people in poverty who ask for government or private assistance *could* have made better choices. Sociological work showing that we can predict ahead of time that certain people are *unlikely* to make such choices should not, on the Cohen-Estlund view, be accepted as evidence that they were unable to act better. Indeed, it would not merely be philosophically mistaken, but disrespectful to the agents in question to hold otherwise.

42 (2014): 113–34; David Estlund, *Utopophobia: On the Limits (If Any) of Political Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

³ G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁴ G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 364.

⁵ Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–43; Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁶ Joseph Carens, *Equality, Incentives, and the Market: An Essay in Utopian Politico-Economic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.)

To be clear, my goal here is not to ask what Cohen and Estlund are personally committed to, given everything they've written elsewhere. I'm a fan of their work, but such exegesis strikes me as too small a topic. Instead, I will argue below that commonsense moral thinking suggests, *pro tanto*, that we should work, contribute to the social surplus, avoid free riding, act prudently, pay taxes, and so on. However, many people, especially those on the Left, are inclined to excuse the Western poor from such responsibilities. The arguments advanced by Cohen and Estlund for utopophilia, if sound, block such excuse-making except in unusual circumstances.

As a foil, I will consider Stuart White's recent theory on the obligation to work (and thus contribute to the social surplus and to public goods). White argues that people can have a duty to work—they should not simply consume redistributed resources without working in turn, if they can work. However, White qualifies this heavily, coming close to saying that such an obligation to work appears only under circumstances of nearly complete social justice and equity. I will argue that utopophiles must reject such a position. White dumbs down the requirements of justice and concedes too much to human nature.

I leave open whether the reader should accept these conclusions all things considered. On the one hand, Cohen-Estlund-style utopophilia vindicates many conservative conclusions about poverty, because it demands that the poor make better choices and pay more taxes. Perhaps we should accept ideal theory and its judgmental implications. Alternatively, if after reflection on its true consequences, this way of theorizing starts to lose its appeal, then one might decide to reject it. But then we must do this across the board. We should not pick and choose based on ideological convenience and bias. We should not be quick to rationalize that the ideologically convenient exceptions to the principles really are exceptions rather than rationalizations. If, as Cohen and Estlund argue, persistent, commonplace, and nagging motivations rarely excuse us from our obligations, this applies to everyone. On their view, justice requires able-bodied citizens, the poor not exempted, to dedicate themselves to making sure their communities are better off with them than without them. In Western economies, of course, this is not obviously a bad result, since finding a way to be a productive contributor to a Western community tends to be accompanied by everything else that makes for a flourishing life.

I. ESTLUND AND COHEN ON MOTIVATION AND THE DEMANDS OF JUSTICE

G. A. Cohen and David Estlund note that many political theories make demands that we know people are unlikely to meet. Just war theories ask leaders to forbear from offensive action, but we know that leaders will initiate aggression and claim they were justified even when they are not. We know that most people are too self-centered to donate much of their income to the poor, and further, that most of their donations are motivated

by the desire to promote their own status.⁷ We know that many people will not behave the way democratic deliberation requires. Politicians will lie to voters and break their promises. People will free ride and prey upon each other in ways that make utopian anarchism fail. People will act in racist and sexist ways. Companies will pollute too much and engage in improper competition and rent seeking. And so on.

Nevertheless, Estlund and Cohen argue, none of this proves that theories of justice that forbid such behaviors are defective or too demanding. Cohen says that everyone agrees that “ought implies can”; people are not obligated to do what they cannot do. But we should avoid confusing the claim that a person very much does not want to do something, finds it demanding, or is inclined against doing it, with the claim that he cannot.

For instance, in the 90s television show *Friends*, Chandler and Joey ask Phoebe if she’d like to come over and help build furniture for another friend. She answers, “I wish I could, but I don’t want to.”⁸ The joke lands because we recognize that the statement is absurd. Phoebe could help even though she doesn’t want to.

Cohen argues that the “interpersonal test” can help us determine whether a purported motivation justifies or excuses a behavior. The interpersonal test involves asking whether a purported justification for an action could reasonably be uttered by any member of the community.⁹ For instance, suppose we consider whether to pay a kidnapper’s ransom. Here, third parties can say, “We must pay the ransom because the kidnapper otherwise will not release the victim.” But, Cohen notes, the kidnapper himself cannot legitimately make that argument. He cannot argue, “You should pay me because otherwise I will not release the victim” as a *moral justification* for receiving the payment.¹⁰ The kidnapper’s justification is absurd coming from his lips. However, since not every member of the community can legitimately utter the justification for paying the ransom, it fails the interpersonal test.

Cohen thinks similar remarks apply to talented people who refuse to work for the benefit of others unless they receive a higher-than-average reward for their work. Suppose, as many egalitarians think, and as John Rawls sometimes seems to think, that equal income and wealth are base-lines from which departures must be justified. On Cohen’s reading, Rawls thinks we easily can justify such departures, because many talented people will not employ their talents, or will not employ them in especially productive ways, unless they receive higher pay than others. For instance, many of my students would not choose to become medical doctors, accountants, engineers, or other high-value, highly productive professionals if they did not receive higher pay and higher status. If they were guaranteed equal

⁷ See Kevin Simler and Robin Hanson, *The Elephant in the Brain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n780KlqdEwE>.

⁹ Cohen, *Rescuing Justice*, 42.

¹⁰ Cohen, *Rescuing Justice*, 38-39.

income and status no matter what, or no matter what kind of work they do, they would indulge low-value hobby-like activities, such as writing poetry no one wants to read.

On the (here undefended) assumption that equality is a baseline from which departures must be justified, Cohen argues that paying people with extra income or higher status does not pass the interpersonal test. Sure, we can say to each other, “We should pay Talented Tammy more because she otherwise would be a beach bum. We benefit from her using her talents productively.” But Cohen claims, Tammy cannot, with a straight face, threaten to withhold her talents unless she receives higher income and status. That would simply show she does not care much about equality.¹¹

Let’s turn now to Estlund. In *Utopophobia*,¹² Estlund more rigorously examines the circumstances under which people’s attitudes and motivations constitute genuine barriers that block or otherwise relieve them of what would have been motivations. He argues that these circumstances are highly constrained.

For one, Estlund argues that positing human selfishness typically adds nothing in estimating people’s moral requirements. Bill might be too selfish to clean up his mess, but that does not excuse him. His selfishness does not explain away his obligations; rather, it explains *why* he fails to meet his obligations.¹³

Estlund claims that nothing changes if such selfishness is common and typical. If most people are too selfish to clean up the messes they impose on others, it does not follow that they have no obligation to clean. It follows instead that most people act badly because they are selfish.¹⁴

Estlund says that conflicting motives might appear in special cases where a person has other obligations that trump the putative obligation in question. For instance, imagine that if a psychiatrist divulges her patients’ medical secrets, this will somehow promote socially just outcomes. Suppose the psychiatrist is nevertheless strongly motivated to keep the secrets. Here, Estlund agrees that the psychiatrist may lack any obligation to promote social justice by divulging secrets. But the reason is not her unwillingness, per se, but rather her preexisting obligations to her clients—obligations that enjoy lexical priority over the demands of social justice.¹⁵ Indeed, even if the psychiatrist *wanted* to divulge the secrets, she still ought not do so. So, the conflicting motive matters not because it conflicts with considerations of social justice, but because the motive happens to coincide with a lexically superior obligation.

¹¹ Cohen allows that making people do work they reasonably hate, or which takes a lot of effort should count in some way, and so more precisely, he wants to equalize the total package of benefits and burdens.

¹² Estlund, *Utopophobia*.

¹³ Estlund, *Utopophobia*, 102.

¹⁴ Estlund, *Utopophobia*, 102-3.

¹⁵ Estlund *Utopophobia*, 103-4.

Estlund also warns us not to confuse questions of personal moral prerogative with questions of motivation. Many theorists argue that individuals have a wide sphere of personal prerogative to live their lives as they see fit; they are not required to dedicate their entire lives to promoting utilitarian ends, human welfare, or social justice.¹⁶ Though Estlund officially remains neutral about the content of morality and justice in *Utopophobia*, he accepts that personal prerogative might block what otherwise would have been duties to act in certain ways. For instance, perhaps Estlund would have better served social justice by becoming a medical researcher, but personal prerogative permits him to be a philosopher. Perhaps Bob would somehow promote social justice by marrying Tom, but personal prerogative permits him to marry Ed instead. And so on. However, Estlund contends, the justification for thinking people have such personal prerogative is not that people are callous, selfish, or unwilling to do what's right. Rather, personal prerogative is grounded in people's legitimate interests in living a free and autonomous life of their own design. Once again, Estlund concludes, "I don't want to do that" is not itself a justification for thinking, "I have no duty to do that."

Estlund claims that contrary motives block obligations only in special cases, only when the motive is "clinical." For instance, if a person genuinely cannot choose to do something due to some genuine psychological disability, the obligation is blocked. Estlund allows that if a person could choose to do something, but due to a psychological condition, doing so would impose severe hardship, then the person may be excused. For instance, a person might normally be obligated to pull a child from a well, but is at least partly excused if she has severe phobia of enclosed spaces and the dark.¹⁷

Overall, Estlund claims, we must be careful not to assume that contrary motives are disabling. Otherwise, we cast people as if they lacked the appropriate kind of free will or moral agency. Rich could give to Poor, even though he'd much rather buy a yacht. People could avoid cheating or free riding on public goods, even though they are tempted to cheat. People could work for others' benefit without expecting a selfish return, even though they're callous. Business owners could play fair and avoid shady practices, even though they are tempted to snatch illicit profits.¹⁸ Appealing to contrary motives, such as wealth, status, self-interest, bias, leisure, love, or fear does not block a moral obligation, Estlund says, unless the person is genuinely disabled by these motives. Further, it does not matter for Estlund whether these motives result from human nature or poor socialization.

¹⁶ E.g., Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 102–110.

¹⁷ Estlund, *Utopophobia*, 107–111.

¹⁸ Estlund, *Utopophobia*, 112.

I note that Estlund and Cohen are not in complete agreement here. Cohen thinks that having contrary inclinations matters more than Estlund does.¹⁹ But this motivates Estlund's project; he has a more consistent account of which conditions are exculpatory or not.

II. RELIABLE PREDICTIONS OF BEHAVIOR DO NOT DEMONSTRATE A LACK OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

It's common among people who reject ideal theorizing to take certain sociological facts about human behavior for granted. For instance, we can reliably predict that if a large-scale cooperative scheme among millions of strangers offers equal rewards to all regardless of effort or contribution, then people will free ride and under-contribute to that scheme. For this reason, various economists and philosophers say certain kinds of socialism will not work and that, absent some assurance mechanism, the free market will underprovide public goods.

But, Cohen and Estlund say, *will not work* does not imply *cannot work*. Such cooperative schemes do not require people to do anything that they cannot do. Perhaps most people want to free ride, but they certainly can avoid doing so. Perhaps most do not want to do their share, but they certainly could. If everyone were morally perfect, no one would free ride, and if we knew that no one would free ride, we would have no strategic justification for failing to contribute. (Note that Cohen and Estlund might agree that even a moral saint would justifiably not contribute if she knew that everyone else was a knave and would selfishly free ride, but their point is that the knaves' selfishness does not excuse them.)

A general upshot of utrophilia is that stable social scientific predictions of human behavior rarely qualify as excuses for that behavior, or as proof of a lack of moral responsibility. Social scientists can investigate and reliably identify conditions under which immoral behaviors become more or less probable. Sociologists, economists, moral and social psychologists, and other social scientists have identified how various social contexts, peer pressures, incentive structures, and even mundane things like wall colors can reliably modify people's behavior on the aggregate. But this should not be taken to show that people *could* not have behaved otherwise, or even that it would be difficult for them to behave otherwise. "I really don't want to" is rarely exculpatory.

For example, psychologists have found that students are more likely to cheat on an exam when the exam room is dirty, and less likely to cheat if they smell Windex or the room is clean. They are more likely to cheat if they are hungry, tired, or stressed.²⁰ They are more likely to cheat if their school lacks

¹⁹ E.g., see the discussion of expensive tastes in G. A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 177.

²⁰ Daniel Ariely, *The Honest Truth about Dishonesty* (New York: Harper, 2012).

a student-run honor council, or if their grade depends on one or two exams rather than on multiple smaller projects.²¹ But none of this excuses their behavior or shows they cannot be honest. Students cannot justify or excuse their actions by saying, “Well, the room was dirty, I was tired, and the exam was worth 100 percent of my grade, so therefore I lack any moral responsibility for cheating.”

Similarly, aspects of fraternity drinking culture might make it more likely that men will date-rape drunken women. But this does not even begin to excuse such behavior. If a frat member strongly desired to rape, or had been socialized into rape culture and misogyny, that would not exculpate him. A cutthroat, money-centered culture at a business, or a system of diffused official responsibility,²² might make it more likely that businesspeople will lie, cheat, steal, break the law, or commit fraud, while a values-centered approach might make it less likely.²³ Nevertheless, they could do the right thing, regardless of the culture.

And so on. Examples like this can be multiplied indefinitely. However, no such examples, if the Cohen-Estlund position is correct, serve to vindicate, justify, or excuse bad behavior, or to demonstrate a lack of responsibility, except in special circumstances where it can be proven the people in question had clinically disabling motives, severe psychological trauma, or are physically unable to act otherwise. It is insufficient that people very much want to do the bad thing, feel peer pressure to do it, face perverse incentives, are immersed in a culture of wrongdoing, and so on. Sociological prediction does not entail some sort of exculpatory *determinism*. People will not act better, but they could, often with ease. Even if free will is a continuum, and some have more of it than others, we should not be quick to declare that people lack autonomy or freedom to act otherwise.

If so, this applies rather straightforwardly to the problems of poverty too. These same standards must be applied consistently to the poor and those out of work. Let’s turn now to considering that issue.

III. THE GRASSHOPPER, THE ANT, AND THE BEETLE

People used to speak of the distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor. The terms refer not to whether the people *deserved* to be poor, but rather whether they *deserved* charity. Whether they deserved charity in turn supposedly depended on whether and how their own choices led them to or perpetuated their poverty.

Consider, for instance, Aesop’s fable of the grasshopper and the ant. In the most common version, the ant works all summer to store food for

²¹ Donald McCabe, Linda Treviño, and Kenneth Butterfield, *Why Students Cheat in College and What to Do about It* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

²² Robert Jackall, *Moral Mazes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²³ Lynn Sharp Pain, “Managing for Organizational Integrity,” *Harvard Business Review* 72 (1994): 106–117.

winter. The grasshopper spends the summer playing and thus has no food when winter comes. The grasshopper then begs the ant for food.

Most readers react by thinking the grasshopper acted wrongly. He knew winter was coming. He consciously chose not to work, substituting leisure for labor. When the grasshopper asks the ant for food, he thereby seeks to externalize the costs of his own bad choices onto the ant.

The grasshopper does not merely consume the ant's extra food. In a way, he consumes the ant's time and life.²⁴ While the grasshopper enjoyed himself, the ant worked. When the grasshopper asks to be fed, he asks the ant to pay for the grasshopper's happiness with the ant's own sweat. Even if, out of mercy or grace, the ant should feed the grasshopper, the grasshopper does not *deserve* such charity.

The grasshopper says to the ant, "You worked. I played. Now I will starve unless you feed me." He puts the ant in a position to feel guilty and obligated, despite the ant having done nothing wrong. That is a disrespectful way for moral agents to treat one another.

In Aesop's version, there are only two characters. But Aesop thereby hides the full extent of the grasshoppers' wrongdoing. We can see this by adding characters. Suppose the ant has exactly enough food to feed two bugs. He agrees to feed the grasshopper. Imagine right after feeding the grasshopper, a beetle comes along. The beetle also needs charity because, unlike the grasshopper or the ant, she *cannot* work. Or suppose the beetle did everything in her power to ensure against disaster, but nevertheless, disaster struck and she is destitute. Here, the beetle requires the charity of others through no fault of her own. But if the ant has already fed the grasshopper, he cannot feed the beetle. Thus, the grasshopper is not merely mistreating the ant; he is also reducing the ant's ability to help others who are more deserving. Again, the grasshopper should have foreseen this kind of danger, and so is blameworthy.

Even this understates the problem. The grasshopper is able-bodied. Instead of asking for help, he could have chosen to be in a position to help others such as the beetle. Instead of demanding alms, he could himself have been an almsgiver. The moral considerations that might obligate others to feed the grasshopper, simultaneously and even more strongly obligate the grasshopper to be in a position to feed others.

In commonsense morality, we think that people should give in proportion to their ability to give. The very rich have stronger duties of beneficence than the poor because charity costs them less. But if there is a general duty of beneficence, it must in part be based not merely on how much income or wealth one actually has to give, but on what one could have given away if one had made different choices. When the grasshopper chooses not to work, he thereby prevents himself from helping others. We need not imagine that the grasshopper refuses to work because he wishes to avoid beneficence;

²⁴ Cf. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 169.

imagine instead that he is too self-centered and inconsiderate to even notice this issue. But this seems wrongful. The grasshopper is able-bodied but lazy. Others need his help, but he chooses to act in ways that ensure he cannot help them. He remains blind to their needs.

Even this understates the problem. All budgets are limited. When the grasshopper gets fed without working, this consumes resources that could have been used for other good causes. Perhaps the ant's labor or extra resources could have been used to create museums, concerts, public roads, schools, or anti-spider defense projects. When the grasshopper eats without working, he's eating away at the valuable public or private works that could have been. Again, these are all easily predictable and foreseeable costs of the grasshopper's bad behavior.

Suppose we introduce many more characters and make the system more complex. Suppose there are many ants who work together, producing a massive social surplus. Suppose that they put together a kind of social insurance and welfare system for ants who lose their food through no fault of their own, or for the occasional invalid beetle who literally cannot work and needs their help. Once again, when the irresponsible grasshopper asks to be fed, he lives off the ants' sweat, consumes the ants' time, reduces the ants' ability to enjoy extra luxuries they legitimately wish to indulge, inhibits the ants' ability to provide for beetles or others, and inhibits their production of valuable public or private works.

If we add more details, the grasshopper's moral failings further increase. In the original story, the grasshopper and ant live in a state of nature and collect food from the land. But suppose that the ants have further constructed something like a primitive form of government that provides various public goods, as well as public works projects that are not technically public goods, but that are often provided by real-life governments. For instance, suppose the ants work and then pay something like taxes into a central allocation system, which in turn pays for a public beach, public roads, schools, a protection force (to keep the spiders away), and the like. Suppose the grasshopper enjoys all of these benefits. He spends his day surfing at the public beach. He travels on the public roads. At night, he reads books borrowed from the public library. He knows how to read because he attended a public school. He lives without fear because of the public protection force.

We may wish to resist saying that the grasshopper owes some sort of debt to everyone for the public benefits that he received as a child.²⁵ Nevertheless, as an adult, he voluntarily chooses to use the public goods and the collectively provided goods that the ants pay for. Since the grasshopper does not work in any way, he does not directly or indirectly contribute to these goods in turn. Instead, he free rides. He takes advantage of the ants' hard work.

²⁵ For a discussion of the complexities here, see David Schmidtz, *Elements of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 85–103.

On the Cohen-Estlund view, we cannot easily excuse the grasshopper's behavior above. We would have to show he had a clinical addiction to playing violin or surfing, or some sort of clinical pathology that prevents him from working. We would have to show he genuinely lacks free will or that working imposes intense suffering upon him, equivalent to the suffering a clinically phobic person feels around snakes. Otherwise, he is responsible for his behavior. Even if we can find things in his past that allow sociologists to reliably predict his laziness—for example, if his parents were also lazy and didn't prioritize education, or if his friends look down on work—this would not suffice.

The immediate upshot of all this is probably clear: if a person could work but chooses not to, and further lives off of charity or tax-funded welfare, then to that degree that person free rides on public goods and publicly provided goods, fails to pay taxes that could provide aid for others, fails to put themselves in a position to help others through charity, fails to provide further funding for public goods and public projects, consumes other people's time and sweat, and deprives others of opportunities to indulge in luxuries. If it is wrong for the grasshopper to do all that, then it is wrong for any similarly situated and similarly motivated person to do the same. Perhaps, though, there is a disanalogy between many real-life people and the grasshopper, or perhaps real-life people have some "clinical" pathologies that relieve them of such duties. I'll consider that possibility below.

Before moving on, I'll note that appropriate "work" in this story need not be paid work. Volunteering or other forms of unpaid labor often are direct or indirect mechanisms for contributing to the system and thus avoiding the charges that befall the grasshopper here. For instance, my stay-at-home spouse may not earn money for taxes, but she enables me to earn more money and pay more taxes. I won't explore beyond this caveat, though, because it will not affect the argument below.

IV. PATHOLOGIES OF POVERTY AND BAD CHOICES

In commonsense morality, the grasshopper's behavior is wrong. The grasshopper takes advantage of the ants, disrespects them, and free rides on their labors. The grasshopper fails to pay into public goods he benefits from, and further fails to put himself in a position to aid others. The grasshopper consumes resources that could have helped the less fortunate or promoted other good causes.

Let's ask: How do these points apply to real-life people? And what must utophiles say?

Consider that many adults in the West retire without sufficient savings and investments to pay for their retirements. Now, if they paid into a government-mandated social security or pension scheme, it makes sense to collect from it when old. Here, they are acting like the ant, not the

grasshopper. However, if they do not have enough even after that, they are often in that respect like the grasshopper. Every current retiree knew for their entire adult lives that retirement was coming. A large percentage of them could have saved more, by forgoing purchases of extra television sets, buying high quality used cars instead of new cars, buying cheaper cell phones, taking less expensive vacations, owning smaller houses, and so on. Insofar as their poverty in old age results from having chosen to consume rather than save, they are grasshoppers.²⁶

In contrast, consider the situation of most people in, say, Haiti. Economists left and right agree that a person's life prospects depend significantly on the background institutions and level of economic development in the country in which she is born. Haiti's purchasing-price parity-adjusted gross domestic product—that is, adjusting its GDP for its lower cost of living in order to compare it to the United States—is about \$1800.²⁷ In contrast, the U.S. poverty line for a single adult living alone is around \$12,760, six times higher than the mean personal income in Haiti. (Remember, \$1 PPP-adjusted dollar in Haiti equals \$1 in the United States.) Because Haiti has dysfunctional institutions,²⁸ and a low level of economic development, most people born in Haiti are destined, regardless of how prudently and conscientiously they act, to a level of poverty significantly below what the United States considers its own poverty line. The typical Haitian, then, is likely to be among the poor who deserve assistance. A Haitian who acts like the ant will nevertheless often remain poor because of factors outside her control.

Relatedly, we should distinguish temporary job losses caused by sudden and unpredictable economic downturns from persistent joblessness or poverty. In spring 2020, over 30 million Americans lost their jobs due to the unexpected COVID-19 crisis and the resulting shutdowns. While some such people perhaps could have saved more to insure against any such disaster, nevertheless, it's plausible that even with very high levels of prudence, most would have lost their income temporarily. But this is not comparable to a person who simply declines to work, or who frequently loses their job because they choose to perform poorly.

The moderately left-wing Brookings Institute published a famous article showing that poor American teenagers can almost guarantee they will enter and remain in the middle class if they follow three simple rules: "finish high school, get a full-time job and wait until age 21 to get married and have

²⁶ Bob Friedman, Ying Shi, Sarah Rosen Wartell, "Savings: The Poor Can Save Too," *Democracy* 26 (2012), URL = <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/26/savings-the-poor-can-save-too/>.

²⁷ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?locations=HT-DO>.

²⁸ Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail* (New York: Currency, 2013); Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); David Weil, *Economic Growth*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012).

children".²⁹ For instance, suppose a poor American teenager finishes high school. She gets a low-wage full-time job, such as janitor. She uses birth control, such as condoms, which cost only sixty cents per use, and can be acquired for free (with free delivery) from various places. She doesn't have children out-of-wedlock or before age twenty-one. If she follows these easy rules, she has only a 2 percent chance of being poor (by rich American standards) as an adult, and a 75 percent chance of ending up in the middle class, defined here as making at least \$55,000 a year. (Note that \$55,000 a year puts her well within the top 1 percent of world income earners.)³⁰

The Brookings study claims that these factors are causal, not mere correlations. Having a child out of wedlock as a teenager, not finishing high school, and not working more or less guarantee you will be poor.

Notice the implied difference, here, between the relatively poor citizens of rich Western democracies versus the poor in less or undeveloped countries. A person born in Haiti who takes any full-time job she can, who avoids having children until over the age of twenty-one and until married, and who finishes high school, can nevertheless expect to be very poor, far poorer than what the United States considers its own poverty line. Because her country has low economic development and dysfunctional institutions, she may be unable to escape poverty even if she exercises extraordinary levels of prudence. While *some* poor people in the United States, Sweden, or other rich Western democracies might personally face such conditions—where basic prudence would not suffice to save them from poverty—the majority can escape poverty by using condoms, getting any job, and getting a high school diploma or equivalent.

Presumably, a progressive would not want to say of the poor that their agency is so impaired that basic prudence is beyond their capabilities. If they do think so, they should be explicit and affirm the following in response to my argument: "In my view, the typical poor person in the United States is clinically incapable of using condoms, getting any job, and completing a high school diploma. Asking a poor person to use condoms is like asking a person with a severe, pathological phobia of the dark and of insects to spend an evening at the bottom of a well. Or, indeed, it is like asking a schizophrenic person to stop hallucinating."

A massive literature in economics, sociology, and anthropology confirms the view that the Western poor often make self-destructive choices. For instance, low-income families are more likely to experience teen pregnancy.³¹ People in low-income households are more likely to abuse

²⁹ <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/three-simple-rules-poor-teens-should-follow-to-join-the-middle-class/>.

³⁰ Tomas Hellebrant and Paulo Mauro, "The Future of Worldwide Income Distribution," Peterson Institute for Economics, Working Paper No. 15-7, April 1, 2015; Branko Milanovic, *Global Inequality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Branko Milanovic, *The Haves and Have Nots* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

³¹ Jennifer Manlove, Elizabeth Terry, Laura Gitelson, Angela Romano Papillo, and Stephen Russell, "Explaining Demographic Trends in Teenage Fertility, 1980–1995," *Family Planning*

cigarettes or illicit drugs.³² They are more likely to engage in heavy drinking.³³ They are more likely to be obese and suffer the resulting health problems; careful empirical work by economics shows a significant part of this problem is caused by self-control issues rather than exogenous factors.³⁴ (This is one reason why attempts to provide cheap healthy food have failed; even when the poor can afford healthy foods, they disproportionately choose not to eat them.)³⁵ They are far more likely to commit crime.³⁶ The poor demonstrate lower levels of conscientiousness, for instance, as measured by the Stanford marshmallow experiment,³⁷ and higher rates of impulsivity.³⁸

Perspectives 32 (2000): 166–75; Jennifer Manlove, Carrie Mariner, and Angela Romano Papillo, "Subsequent Fertility Among Teen Mothers: Longitudinal Analyses of Recent National Data," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62 (2000): 430–48; Clea A. Sucoff and Dawn M. Upchurch, "Neighborhood Context and the Risk of Childbearing Among Metropolitan-Area Black Adolescents," *American Sociological Review* (1998): 571–85.

³² National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, URL = <https://nsduhweb.rti.org/respweb/homepage.cfm>

³³ Scott Beaulier and Bryan Caplan, "Behavioral Economics and Perverse Effects of The Welfare State," *Kyklos* 60, no. 4 (2007): 485–507, at 495.

³⁴ David M Cutler, Edward L. Glaeser, and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Why Have Americans Become More Obese?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 3 (2003): 93–118.

³⁵ Ruopeng An and Roland Sturm, "School and Residential Neighborhood Food Environment and Diet Among California Youth," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 42 (2012): 129–35; Helen Lee, "The Role of Local Food Availability in Explaining Obesity Risk Among Young School-Aged Children," *Social Science and Medicine* 74 (2012): 1193–1203.

³⁶ Pat Carlen, *Women, Crime, and Poverty* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988); E. Britt Patterson, "Poverty, Income Inequality, and Community Crime Rates," *Criminology* 29, no. 4 (1991): 755–76; Jen Ludwig, Greg J. Duncan, and Paul Hirschfield, "Urban Poverty and Juvenile Crime: Evidence from a Randomized Housing-Mobility Experiment," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 116 (2001): 655–79; Richard A Berk, Kenneth J. Lenihan, and Peter H. Rossi, "Crime and Poverty: Some Experimental Evidence from Ex-Offenders," *American Sociological Review* (1980): 766–86; Valentina Nikulina, Cathy Spatz Widom, and Sally Czaja, "The Role of Childhood Neglect and Childhood Poverty in Predicting Mental Health, Academic Achievement and Crime in Adulthood," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 48, nos. 3–4 (2011): 309–321; Jonathan Ilan, *Understanding Street Culture: Poverty, Crime, Youth and Cool* (New York: Macmillan International Higher Education, 2015).

³⁷ Greg J. Duncan and Saul D. Hoffman, "Teenage Underclass Behavior and Subsequent Poverty: Have The Rules Changed," in *The Urban Underclass* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2001): 155–74; Angelina R. Sutin, Michele K. Evans, and Alan B. Zonderman, "Personality Traits and Illicit Substances: The Moderating Role of Poverty," *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 131, no. 3 (2013): 247–51; Jodi C. Letkiewicz and Jonathan J. Fox, "Conscientiousness, Financial Literacy, and Asset Accumulation of Young Adults," *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 48, no. 2 (2014): 274–300; Tim Bogg and Brent W. Roberts, "The Case for Conscientiousness: Evidence and Implications for a Personality Trait Marker of Health And Longevity," *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 45, no. 3 (2013): 278–88.

³⁸ Jessica D Burdick, Amanda L. Roy, and C. Cybele Raver, "Evaluating the Iowa Gambling Task as a Direct Assessment of Impulsivity with Low-Income Children," *Personality and Individual Differences* 55, no. 7 (2013): 771–76; Donald R. Lynam, "The Interaction Between Impulsivity and Neighborhood Context on Offending: The Effects of Impulsivity Are Stronger in Poorer Neighborhoods," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 109, no. 4 (2000): 563; Vijaya Murali and Femi Oyebode, "Poverty, Social Inequality and Mental Health," *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* 10, no. 3 (2004): 216–24; Ruby K. Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (New York: Aha Process, 2005).

These factors are not merely *correlated* with poverty, but *cause* poverty. Excessive drinking, drug use, crime, impulsivity, failing to finish high school, having children at a young age and outside marriage, and so on, lead to financial instability.

Many people are inclined to say that poverty also *causes* those behaviors. From a sociological standpoint, we can reliably predict that people born and raised in poverty will exhibit such behaviors. But, again, Cohen and Estlund warn us, first, not to dumb down principles of justice to accommodate bad features of human nature, and, second, not to confuse “won’t” with “can’t.” Again, though, on the Cohen-Estlund view, reliably predicting that people will make such choices is not sufficient to show they *could not have chosen otherwise* or that they lack moral responsibility for such choices. In most of these cases, a person born into bad circumstances could take reasonable steps to avoid the behaviors that cause poverty. Indeed, since prudent choices would make them much better off, we cannot even say they have strong selfish incentives to act otherwise. Most poor people are capable of declining to have sex with unreliable people who are unlikely to support a child, or they are capable of using cheap/free birth control. Most poor people could finish high school. Most could choose not to do drugs, or do smaller amounts of less dangerous drugs. Most could get a job and show up on time. Most could save even small amounts of money and use it to improve their situation, rather than overspend. Indeed, sociological and economic work shows that people living in extreme poverty outside the first world generally have high rates of saving and create nongovernmental forms of mutual aid and social insurance.³⁹

For the poor, given their worse circumstances, these choices are indeed often more burdensome to make than for the rich. (However, the rich also frequently face less personal danger from making self-destructive choices, because their wealth or their parents’ wealth can insulate them from the consequences of imprudence.) The point here is not to say that it is as easy for, say, a poor teenager from a blighted rural town to succeed as for her counterpart in a flourishing suburb of Washington, DC. The question instead is whether the teenager’s circumstances are so bad that she thereby lacks agency and is thereby relieved of blame if she acts in self-destructive or imprudent ways.

Even if people in poverty feel more social or peer pressure to act in self-destructive ways, this does not suffice to prove they *cannot* act differently or even that they face exculpatory conditions. To excuse these behaviors, one must show that the poor lack the mental capacity to choose better or are under severe external duress. I note, as a sociological observation, that my fellow academics agree that being a frat member who is socialized into misogyny or a rape culture does not relieve him of responsibility for

³⁹ Collins, Daryl, Jonathan Morduch, Stuart Rutherford, and Orlanda Ruthven, *Portfolios of the Poor: How the World’s Poor Live on \$2 a Day* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

misogyny or rape. They say that socialization into greed or a cutthroat culture doesn't relieve Wall Street bankers of responsibility for corrupt business practices. They say that socialization into racism does not exculpate white racism. And so on. Saying the poor are different seems like ideologically motivated rationalization rather than a coherent position.

This is not to deny that many poor people are blameless, and indeed are using every means at their disposal to work themselves out of poverty. As someone who grew up poor by American standards, I've seen this confirmed firsthand. But to deny that the poor are in positions of responsibility, to themselves at a minimum, is not to be done lightly. Indeed, to claim that poor people could not have done otherwise than to be, and remain, poor generally involves disrespectfully denying their own agency. Cohen-Estlund utrophilia implies a commitment to viewing the poor as blameworthy, and many readers will regard this as a nontrivial cost.

V. POLICY VERSUS BLAME

Cohen-Estlund utrophilia requires us to blame many of the Western poor for making choices that cause them to become or remain poor. It implies that for multiple reasons, the poor should work, avoid taking too much tax-funded welfare, and pay more taxes. However, I pause here to note that showing that someone has a duty to work rather than demand welfare does not by itself imply that the state should not provide him with welfare.

Suppose someone gets drunk and falls into a pool. Or suppose someone drinks, drives, and hits a tree. Or suppose someone chooses to skate without a helmet, falls, and breaks his skull. In these cases, the person is blameworthy for his behavior. However, it does not follow, nor is it obvious, that therefore no one should rescue him after he is hurt. If a bystander can pull the drunk person out of the pool at little cost to himself, perhaps he should. Perhaps government paramedics and medical doctors should still rescue and heal the drunk driver or skater.

I will not explore this point further. I simply note that even while utrophilia tells us to blame (many of) the poor, it remains open whether the poor should nevertheless be granted welfare assistance. This point might make the conservative implications of Cohen-Estlund utrophilia more palatable to nonconservatives. Again, the reckless motorcyclist might not deserve the ambulance, but perhaps we should send it anyway.

VI. STUART WHITE ON THE DUTY TO WORK

In *The Civic Minimum*, Stuart White defends a communitarian theory of economic citizenship grounded in ideals of inclusive reciprocity. Citizens are entitled to certain welfare benefits and public goods, but they are also obligated to put in a minimum number of lifetime hours of productive work

that contributes directly or indirectly to the social surplus, if they can. His argument is similar to mine above when discussing the grasshopper, ants, and beetles.

White defends the “reciprocity principle,” which says that “each citizen who willingly shares in the social product has an obligation to make a relevantly proportional productive contribution to the community in return.”⁴⁰ He argues that a proper conception of economic citizenship sees citizens as holding both rights and duties, not merely rights to resources free of any duty to contribute. He argues that traditional liberal theories are often desiccated because they focus only on rights and ignore how those rights, in the absence of corresponding duties to work, would imply unfair demands on others.⁴¹ If the grasshopper has the right to be fed regardless of whether he works, this conscripts the ant to feed him. It exploits the ant on behalf of the grasshopper.⁴² White argues that free riding on a welfare system or on the productive surplus more generally, imposes unjustifiable differential burdens.⁴³ White does not claim that each citizen must work their entire adult life, but they must fulfill a minimum work obligation over the course of their lives.⁴⁴ They must also avoid taking advantage of others’ efforts. They should generally be net taxpayers, though White makes concessions for unpaid and thus untaxable labor that directly or indirectly contributes to the social surplus.

Thus, one might expect that White endorses the positions—such as blaming many of the poor for their poverty and holding that they have a duty to work—which I claim that utopophiles must endorse. However, White heavily qualifies his position, suggesting that the obligation to work exists only when rather stringent conditions of equal opportunity are met, including that (1) no citizen suffers from poverty from forces beyond her control, (2) citizens enjoy significant security against the vicissitudes of the market and against exploitation, (3) citizens have real opportunity to enjoy work that they regard as an “intrinsically valuable challenge,” and (4) inequality in opportunity and starting income are minimized to a significant degree.⁴⁵ Note that (1)–(4) are White’s utopophobic concessions to reality; they are what he says his theory requires in “its non-ideal form.”⁴⁶ His ideal theory is even more stringent. However, conditions (1)–(4) are probably not individually, let alone collectively, met anywhere, so this seems to suggest that White thinks the duty to work would only exist in societies significantly more just (in White’s view) than any actual society.

⁴⁰ Stuart White, *The Civic Minimum* (New York: Oxford University Press, 18).

⁴¹ White, *The Civic Minimum*, 26.

⁴² White, *The Civic Minimum*, 62.

⁴³ White, *The Civic Minimum*, 64.

⁴⁴ White, *The Civic Minimum*, 114.

⁴⁵ White, *The Civic Minimum*, 19–20.

⁴⁶ White, *The Civic Minimum*, 20.

This is puzzling. Note that White's major arguments, which I have outlined here, suggest different kinds of grounds for an obligation to work. Some of his arguments explicitly depend upon citizens living within and benefiting from a system of fair reciprocity. Citizens must work because they receive benefits from a system that treats them the right way and ensures that they have fair and equal opportunity. Duties arise as a result of participating in and benefitting from a system of mutual regard. If actual societies do not qualify as having such systems, then obligations do not arise that otherwise would.

But many of White's arguments do not depend upon society being nearly perfect. Even if a system has significant starting inequalities of wealth, income, and opportunity, even if many people lack the chance to find intrinsically rewarding and challenging jobs, even if people are not adequately protected from the market, nevertheless, when citizens consume without working, and if they specifically consume government welfare without working, they impose differential burdens and free ride on those who do work. They arguably exploit them as well. To illustrate, suppose there is an unfair monopolistic economy. Evil Mr. Burns owns all the factories. Everyone else is a poor proletarian. Ninety-nine percent of people nevertheless work and pay into a welfare redistributive system that provides modest supplements to the poor. Suppose Surfer Sam could work but chooses not to; he'd rather use his modest welfare checks to lead a surfer lifestyle. Here, even though the system may be unfair and unjust, Sam also commits an injustice within that unjust system. He still takes advantage of his fellow citizens, imposes differential burdens upon them, free rides, and exploits them. They work and he consumes the product of their labor without providing anything back in turn. He cannot justify his mistreatment of his fellow poor citizens—the ones who work and provide him with income—by pointing to Mr. Burns' even worse behavior, or by pointing out that socialist philosophy condemns these social structures.

Further, even if a system of cooperation is marked by imperfect and unfair kinds of reciprocity, it does not follow that no one owes anything back to others in that system or that anything goes. Consider some micro-level examples. We might think we owe our parents certain filial duties of reciprocity—perhaps by caring for them in their old age—even if they were significantly imperfect parents. When students work together in groups, they generally owe it to each other not to free ride and to do an adequate share of the work, even if the group is badly managed, if the group leader is domineering or shows unfair favoritism, or whatnot. We think that faculty should still do some service work even if the department head distributes service jobs unfairly, based on personal politics. We think faculty should teach well even if classes or raises are assigned unfairly. We think businesses should act ethically even when other businesses do not. And so on. We might agree that people who mistreat us sufficiently can forfeit any

expectation of reciprocity, but nevertheless, some obligations to reciprocate or behave well survive even in quite unjust and unfair situations.

Consider the classic tale of the Good Samaritan. Jesus chooses the Samaritan as an example precisely because his audience regards Samaritans as inferior and tends to mistreat them. But notice that Jesus does not say that the Samaritan's behavior was entirely optional, since the Samaritan had been treated unjustly or was subject to racism or ethnocentric prejudice. Rather, the Samaritan *should* help, and so should we. Similarly, when Peter Singer argues that rich Westerners ought to donate their excess income, he does not claim that a rich Westerner is relieved of such duties if that person had been subjected to racism, had been born poor, or suffered from unequal opportunities. A black person should save the drowning white toddler even if other white people had acted in racist ways toward him.

White might be right that if people have been treated extremely badly, they thereby lose many grounds for obligations to "pay back" into the system. It seems somewhat absurd to demand that a recently emancipated slave in 1865, for example, pay taxes to support governments that recently employed marshals to enforce slavery. But White's position is too strong. He argues that the duty to work and to pay into the social system vanishes quickly as the system departs from perfect social justice, whereas more plausibly, such duties remain even in the face of significant injustice, though they can indeed vanish in certain cases of extreme injustice. (I suppose, here, one would not want to say that the actual economic and political systems of the modern West are so unjust that most of us, or most of the Western "poor," are relieved of reciprocity as much as this slave.)

Consider again the tale of the grasshopper and the many ants. Suppose there are many bugs of many different species. Suppose that many individual bugs are speciesist against grasshoppers, considering them lazy, criminogenic, and incompetent. Suppose that as a result, the grasshopper has fewer opportunities for meaningful work and high status compared to the typical ant, or most other bugs. Suppose some of this results from direct prejudice and some from structural problems that resulted from past policies and prejudices. Here, indeed, the grasshopper has a legitimate complaint against the actual speciesists in his society, plus against the society's failure to fix the systematic problems that disadvantage him. Anyone ever burdened by such pervasive bullying would understand all too well the urge to quit trying and give up. But unless we make the degree of speciesism very severe and very pervasive, or the systematic problems extremely severe and pervasive, this does not yet seem to excuse the grasshopper. If the grasshopper fails to work and pay taxes, he still fails to help the many innocent others he could help and to pay for public goods he uses. If he consumes welfare or government assistance, he still lives off the sweat of innocent others and consumes resources that could have been put to other good uses, including helping those who cannot work, unlike him. Many in his society retain a legitimate complaint against him, even though he has

legitimate complaints against others. Intuitively, as a matter of the very self-respect that the bullying would take away from us, we owe it to ourselves to understand ourselves as beings for whom being subject to injustice is not necessarily the end of our story. One implication is that we need to see ourselves, and we need others to see us, as not automatically relieved of the burdens that fall on us as equal citizens by right.

VII. CONCLUSION

Many assume that nonideal/utopophobic theorizing leads to conservative conclusions, while ideal/utopophile theorizing leads to left-wing or socialist conclusions.⁴⁷ On reflection, matters are more complicated. Those who accept ideal-theoretic methods must apply these methods consistently. It may allow them to evade conservative criticisms that socialism doesn't work, but requires them to endorse conservative positions which hold that most of the Western poor should behave better, overcome their vices, get a job, and pay taxes.

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⁴⁷ On the contrary, in Jason Brennan, *Why Not Capitalism?* (New York: Routledge, 2014), I argue that Cohen's utopian theorizing actually endorses a kind of anarcho-capitalism as superior to his anarcho-socialism.