

What's So Shameful about Shameful Revelations?*

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Abstract

Jonathan Wolff, amongst others, has criticised luck egalitarian theories of distributive justice because these theories require untalented citizens to reveal their lack of talent to the state. He believes that, even in an ideal egalitarian society, this would cause citizens to feel ashamed. Having to reveal facts that one considers shameful undermines one's self-respect. The state should treat its citizens with respect and, thus, it ought not to treat them in ways that undermine their self-respect. In this paper, I argue that this *shameful revelations allegation* is false. In an ideal egalitarian society, people would believe that a person's natural marketable talents are an inappropriate basis on which to measure her value. Emotions typically have a cognitive structure: one of the constitutive components of each particular emotion is a particular type of belief. *Shame* is felt when one believes that one does not possess some quality that one believes one needs to have in order to have value. So, since citizens of an ideal egalitarian society will not believe that a person's value depends on her natural marketable talents, they will not feel ashamed of being untalented. This is good news. Luck egalitarian theories require citizens to reveal their untalentedness because it is necessary in order to achieve fairness in the distribution of resources and/or welfare. Wolff's allegation therefore implies that fairness and respect will conflict in an ideal egalitarian society. But, if I am correct, we may be able to achieve both these values.

Keywords: Ideal luck egalitarianism, democratic egalitarianism, shameful revelation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

All egalitarians ought to take both fairness and respect seriously. Egalitarian theories of distributive justice should, therefore, be sensitive to both these values. In 'Fairness, Respect and the Egalitarian Ethos' Jonathan Wolff argues that even in an *ideal egalitarian society*, that is, a society where the inhabitants embrace and are guided by the underlying principles that inform the way that society is governed, these two values are very likely to conflict (Wolff 1998). Many prominent recent theories of distributive justice have been focused solely on fairness, and his argument is intended as a criticism of them: if, even at the ideal level, we must sacrifice respect to achieve full fairness, we shouldn't seek full fairness and we should spend less time theorising about it. Wolff's claim that fairness and respect are very likely to conflict has considerable *prima facie* plausibility and is well known. Further it has received explicit endorsement by some political theorists (e. g. Hinton 2001: 73; Lang 2009: 329)¹ and is implicit in "What is the Point of Equality?", Elizabeth Anderson's famous polemic against fairness-focused theories (Anderson 1999).² Wolff's claim, however, is incorrect and in this paper I shall demonstrate why. But, before I do so, it is necessary to briefly rehearse Wolff's argument.

The prominent fairness-orientated theories Wolff has in mind are those that have come to be known as 'luck egalitarian' theories.³ Wolff accepts the basic insight of luck egalitarianism (and its conception of fairness): if a person is responsible for having a less than equal share of resources and/or welfare, then this inequality is not unfair (Wolff 1998: 97). To illustrate the insight, consider Will Kymlicka's well-known depiction of it: the tennis player and the gardener.⁴ Two single people of equal natural ability are each given a plot of land with equal potential. One person, the gardener, works hard and cultivates her land. The other person, the tennis player, idles around all day playing tennis. As a result, the gardener becomes rich and the tennis player becomes poor (Kymlicka 2002: 72-3). The luck egalitarian view is that if we required the gardener to transfer some of her wealth to the tennis player, it would be unfair because the tennis player is responsible for his poverty and

1. Richard Arneson criticises Wolff's overall argument, but, unlike mine, his defence of luck egalitarianism does not reject the idea that revealing untalentedness must be shameful (see later in the introduction, Arneson 2000).

2. Anderson does not explicitly refer to Wolff's argument but she does believe that fairness and respect conflict. She asks her readers to imagine untalented citizens receiving letters with their state-benefit cheques. These letters explain to the untalented citizens that they are to receive extra state-benefits because their talents are unmarketable. Then she writes '*Can a self-respecting citizen fail to be insulted by such messages?*' (Anderson 1999: 305, my emphasis).

3. Wolff refers to them as 'opportunity conceptions of equality' (Wolff 1998). I depart from his phrasing in order to follow common usage.

4. The insight is not Kymlicka's. It is Ronald Dworkin's (2000).

the gardener for her wealth.⁵ Conversely, luck egalitarians hold that inequalities in resources and/or welfare that people are not responsible for, that is, inequalities that arise out of brute luck, are unfair. So, for example, if I were born without legs and, in my society, being legless gives one the additional disadvantage of it being more difficult to acquire further resources and/or welfare, this would be unfair. Additionally, luck egalitarianism would, other things equal, require that I be compensated by the state to mitigate for my disadvantage.

In order to achieve a fair distribution, a luck egalitarian state would, therefore, need to collect information about how far each citizen is responsible for having the level of resources or welfare that they do. One piece of information that would be needed to find this out is the level of marketable natural talents (“talents” for short) that each individual has.⁶ This kind of data collection raises issues relating to privacy. However, even leaving these aside, Wolff argues that this type of data collection makes luck egalitarianism problematic because it undermines respect. He says:

Consider... the case of someone who is unemployed at a time of low unemployment and no particular shortage of jobs. To qualify for [state] benefits this person will have to show that he or she does not have the opportunities that others have. But, by hypothesis, ...the failure, if there is one, is... the lack of talent or aptitude for the jobs that are available. To press a claim, then, one is required not merely to admit but to make out a convincing case that one is a failure, unable to gain employment even when there is no difficulty for others. But think how it must feel—how demeaning it must be—to have to admit to oneself and then convince others that one has not been able to secure a job, despite one's best efforts, at a time when others appear to obtain employment with ease (Wolff 1998: 114-115).

Wolff alleges that even in an ideal egalitarian society, having to reveal to oneself and the state that one is untalented would cause citizens to feel ashamed. Following Wolff, I shall call this the *'shameful revelations' allegation* (Wolff 1998: 109). Causing citizens to feel ashamed in the process of granting them their distributive entitlements is not compatible with treating citizens with respect. So, if the shameful revelations allegation were true, then, there would indeed be a conflict between fairness and respect. In response to this

5. Of course, if the tennis player were starving the gardener should give him some food. But it would, nonetheless, be unfair on the gardener to have to do this.

6. Let's assume that people are not responsible, in the relevant sense, for their natural talents. And, since the talents are defined in a *market* based way, being untalented poses a significant barrier to acquiring resources or welfare.

conflict, Wolff proposes that even at an ideal level, we have reason to prefer a system of unconditional state benefits over a luck egalitarian system.

Wolff makes several other (related) arguments in the paper. For example, he discusses two different ways in which having to reveal one's untalentedness might undermine one's self-respect in a non-ideal luck egalitarian society,⁷ notes some problems with using two person examples and points to the dangers of solely doing ideal theory. However, I put these to one side and focus on the following version of the shameful revelations allegation: even in an *ideal* egalitarian society, having to reveal to the state that one is untalented would cause citizens to feel ashamed.

A luck egalitarian could respond to the shameful revelations allegation by simply accommodating its claim. She might say, without much ado, that, of course, luck egalitarianism should be limited in its application by other values (like respect) and no one ever thought otherwise (Lippert-Rasmussen 2009).⁸ There are two versions of this view: that luck egalitarian fairness and respect should be traded off against each other or that luck egalitarianism is conditionally sound, i.e. sound only if it is consistent with respect. Alternatively a luck egalitarian might claim that the shameful revelations allegation provides welfare-based luck egalitarian reasons against the achievement of complete fairness in the distribution of resources. That is, if luck egalitarianism aims to equalise access to welfare, and collecting information about citizens' talents will make them ashamed, then luck egalitarianism would not require this information to be collected (see e. g. Arneson 2000: 177). However, neither of these responses really challenge Wolff's argument, since both responses accept his main contention —that there is a conflict between fairness and respect in a luck egalitarian society. The first type of response clearly grants this main point. That the second does so is less obvious but, in fact, it concedes the problem and pushes it back a level. If one claims that welfare-based luck egalitarian reasons would prohibit making people reveal their lack of talents, then there is still a conflict between fairness and respect - it's just that it's been rebranded, in Wolff's terms, as "fairness conflicted against itself" and, it seems, respect has won (Wolff 1998: 117-118).⁹

My argument does not take this concessive tack. I aim to refute the shameful revelations allegation *itself* and therefore show that the conflict Wolff points to is not real. My basic argument is as follows: emotions have a

7. These are: (i) that to be asked to constantly justify one's claims (including one's claim to state benefits) could be insulting and demeaning because one might feel as though one is not trusted. And (ii) our experience of conditional state benefit schemes tells us that benefit recipients are often 'treated with great rudeness' (See Wolff 1998: 108-9, 111 and 110 respectively).

8. G. A. Cohen and Zofia Stemplowska each give this kind of pluralist response to different challenges to luck-egalitarianism (Cohen 2008: 4; Stemplowska 2008: 243).

9. I thank an anonymous referee for help with framing this paragraph.

cognitive structure, that is, one of the constitutive components of each particular emotion is a particular type of belief. For example, one of the components of fear is the belief that danger is approaching or present. *Shame* is felt when one believes that one does not possess some quality that one believes one needs to have in order to have value (in some deep, but not necessarily moral, sense of the word 'value'). So, in order to be ashamed of being untalented, one must believe that one's value depends on the natural marketable talents one possesses. As I said, Wolff intends the shameful revelations allegation to apply to an ideal egalitarian society, where an ideal egalitarian society is defined as one where the inhabitants embrace and are guided by the underlying principles that inform the way that that society is governed.¹⁰ But believing that a person's value, in any deep sense, depends on her marketable natural talents is highly inegalitarian (although admittedly in a different sense of the word to how it is used in the phrase 'luck-egalitarian'). So it is my contention that in an *ideal* egalitarian society, people will not believe this and, therefore, will not be ashamed of being untalented. The shameful revelations allegation is false and we can, therefore, show that the conflict between fairness and respect is not real. In an ideal egalitarian society, the threat of people having to make shameful revelations will not provide a reason for us to have an unconditional state-benefit system.

My paper will be structured as follows. Section I will outline what beliefs the citizens of a society must hold in order for the society be an ideal egalitarian one. Section II will explain the cognitive structure of emotions and give a brief conceptual analysis of shame. Section III will provide a summary of my argument and give its conclusion. I will consider and reject possible objections to my argument in section IV. (Namely worries arising from (i) the fact that some people in current society would say that marketable talents don't add to a person's value but would feel ashamed if they found out they were untalented and (ii) the fact that careers are important goods for many people). My paper only seeks to defend *ideal* luck egalitarianism from Wolff's

10. I should note that it is a little ambiguous whether by 'an ideal egalitarian society' Wolff means one where the inhabitants embrace the underlying principles. But he does say:

[A]n ethos is a set of underlying values, which... may be explicit or implicit, interpreted as a set of maxims, slogans, or principles, which are then applied in practice. As an idealization we can identify three levels: values, principles, and practice, all of which are part of the group's ethos. Typically the values and principles will be internalized by members of that group, and inform their behaviour' (Wolff 1998: 105 my emphasis).

And, in any case, if this is not what he means by 'ideal egalitarian society', then his argument lacks bite. If someone were to say 'in a society where people do not embrace egalitarian principles, people may well be ashamed at their lack of talents', this would not be a damning criticism of luck egalitarian theories which are, for the most part, pitched at the ideal level as I've defined it.

attack (I would like to be clear about this). However, whether a theory is successful or not at the ideal level affects its application and, in section V, I will conclude by *briefly* and *tentatively* considering the real-world policy implications of my argument.

Let me emphasise that in this paper I am discussing brute or natural talents, like physical abilities or raw intelligence rather than character-trait based talents like drive, ambition, or being hardworking. I limit my discussion in this way for three reasons. First, I am a compatibilist in the context of the free-will debate: *crudely* speaking, even though people do not choose their character traits, there is a sense in which they endorse them¹¹ and I think this is a sufficient basis on which to hold them responsible for them.¹² Second, even if one thinks people are not responsible for their character-trait talents in the relevant sense and that in an ideal luck egalitarian society it is inevitable that people will be ashamed of, for example, being lazy or unambitious this would significantly reduce the force of the shameful revelations allegation. The idea that lazy and unambitious people would be ashamed of claiming state benefits is nowhere near as alarming as the idea that those with, for example, a learning disability would be. Third, this is the meaning Wolff has in mind.¹³

Before getting into the meat of my argument, it is worth mentioning that Wolff has recently published 'Fairness, Respect and the Egalitarian Ethos Revisited' (Wolff 2010). In this paper, Wolff explores some ways in which a person might be tested for untalentedness without shaming them or undermining their self-respect (e. g. by sensitive interviews combined with counselling). His main conclusion in the new paper is that:

11. Consider, for example, the character traits of enjoying cookery, being hard working or even being lazy: there is a sense in which we feel accountable for these traits (perhaps they express some of our values). Contrast this with brute facts about ourselves, such as being tall or having red hair: even if these features form part of our identity we don't feel accountable for them.

12. There is a more nuanced sort of compatibilist view one can take whereby one thinks that say, it is appropriate to hold a person responsible for character traits in some sense (for example it is appropriate to blame him) but it is not appropriate to hold him responsible in the sense that one should refuse to compensate him for it. However, if one does hold this view and one thinks that it is likely that people will be ashamed of laziness even in an ideal luck egalitarian society, this is not that problematic (see main text), especially when viewed from the perspective of someone who already accepts that we can attach some kind of responsibility to unchosen character-traits.

13. We can see this because he distinguishes talents from hard work here:

You may respect [a person] for their hard-work, or for their talents, or their devotion to their ageing parents... (Wolff 1998: 109).

And here:

We are asked to imagine two people, equally talented, one of whom works hard gardening... (Wolff 1998: 99).

[T]hings are very likely to go badly wrong if we set out an ideal theory of equality and then attempt to implement it in the real world without a great deal of further thought about how it would actually impact on people, and the relations between them (Wolff 2010: 349).

I do not disagree with this conclusion but it is obvious and, as Wolff himself says, 'bland' (Wolff 2010: 349). Further, the *main* idea of my paper (that in an ideal luck egalitarian society people would not be ashamed of being untalented) is not discussed in his new paper and the shameful revelations allegation is influential, important and interesting in its own right. For these reasons, unless otherwise stated, I will direct my arguments against the original paper.

2. EGALITARIAN PRINCIPLES AND THE IDEAL EGALITARIAN SOCIETY

There are different kinds of value that a person can have. One is the type of value that persons have just in virtue of being persons. Another type of value is moral value, by which I mean, how morally praiseworthy a person is. I think both these types of value contribute to a person's value and, importantly for our purposes, they contribute to her value in a deep and important sense. (I will refer to the kind of value a person has in a deep and important sense, as a person's *deep value* and shall elaborate a bit as to what I mean by the phrase in section II (ii)). An important question in this paper is whether an egalitarian of any stripe should accept the claim that a person's value in any deep or important sense depends on her level of marketable natural talents. I claim she should not. She may accept that it is valuable for a person to be talented, that a person is more valuable in some trivial sense if she has more marketable natural talents. But accepting any more than this would entail that an able-bodied person is correct to say to a legless person, 'Look here legless person, I am more valuable than you, in a deep and important sense, because I can walk and you cannot'. But such a claim seems morally objectionable and unacceptably inegalitarian.¹⁴ So, I think that no egalitarian—indeed nobody—should accept that a person's deep value hinges on her marketable natural talents. Moreover, I think that most, if not all, egalitarians do not accept this. So I propose:

14. Elizabeth Anderson writes:

[Luck egalitarianism] makes the basis for citizens' claims on one another the fact that some are inferior to others in the worth of their lives, talents, and personal qualities. Thus, its principles express contemptuous pity for those the state stamps as sadly inferior' (Anderson 1999: 298).

Has she forgotten that the value of a person and the marketable value of a person's talents are *not* the same thing and that it is objectionable and inegalitarian to think otherwise?

The irrelevance of talents principle (ITP): A person's deep value does not depend on her level of marketable natural talents.

Accepting the ITP is not entailed by belief in the luck egalitarian principle (LEP). (The LEP is that it is unfair *if people are disadvantaged* in terms of welfare and/or resources because of things that they are not responsible for, not that *people's deep value* is unaffected by their talents). But there is nothing to stop a person from believing in both the ITP and the LEP. And I suspect that many (but not all) luck egalitarians are motivated to accept the LEP precisely because of something like the following thought process: differences in natural marketable talents are (i) arbitrary from a moral point of view, and therefore (ii) do not affect a person's deep value and thus (iii) ought not to be a barrier to her accessing welfare and/or resources. There is some controversy to the issue. For example, those who accept moral luck may try to argue that deep value tracks certain skills (e. g. they could try to argue that a surgeon with twelve well functioning fingers is of more value). However, it is always open to a luck egalitarian to adopt the ITP as a principle which she thinks should inform the ethos of an egalitarian society, even if it is not this principle that motivated her to become a luck egalitarian.¹⁵ Moreover, rejecting the ITP is somewhat unpalatable. I lack the space to engage in a fuller defence of the ITP here, so I will simply take the more intuitive view, which I happen to endorse, as my springboard.¹⁶

Following John Rawls, I assume, uncontroversially, that in order for a society to be an *ideal* egalitarian society, its inhabitants must embrace and be guided by egalitarian principles (Rawls 1999: 397). I include the ITP as an egalitarian principle (although it is a different type of egalitarian principle to the LEP). So I propose:

1. In an ideal egalitarian society, citizens will firmly embrace the ITP. That is, they will not believe a person's deep value depends on her level of marketable natural talents.

Wolff intends the shameful revelations allegation to apply at the ideal level. He says: 'revealing that one is of low talent will be considered shameful, *even in an ideal egalitarian society*' (Wolff 1998: 115 my emphasis). That is, he believes that people who embraced egalitarian principles would be ashamed of being untalented. But I find this puzzling. Why would people be ashamed

15. Wolff's argument leaves the impression that the conflict between fairness and respect is nigh on inevitable (though he shies back from such strong language). Thus even if a luck egalitarian adopts the ITP as an additional, rather than internal, principle she can still challenge this assumption.

16. I thank Zofia Stemplowska for some of the material in this paragraph.

of being untalented if they really believed that their talents don't contribute to their value in any deep sense?

In the rest of the paper I will argue that I am correct to be puzzled. If people believed in the ITP firmly enough, they wouldn't be ashamed of being untalented. In order to explain why not, I must say something about both the conceptual structure of emotions generally, and what shame is.

3. EMOTIONS AND SHAME

3.1. The Structure Of Emotions¹⁷

There is a high level of agreement amongst philosophers of emotion that in order for some feeling to be, conceptually speaking, an emotion it must contain a *cognitive* component, that is, it must contain a belief,¹⁸ and this belief must be appropriately connected to the emotion in question.¹⁹ Let me say a few words to help explain this definition. Our emotions are not just empty electrical impulses. For example, if someone 'has just raped my child, my anger...is not just a mindless impulse. It involves a thought about the terrible damage my child has just suffered, and the wrongfulness of the offenders act' (Nussbaum 2004: 10). To illustrate how central the cognitive component is to the concept of emotion, imagine a woman who has a racing heart, is trembling, has light nausea, is red, narrows her eyes, bares her teeth and bangs her fist on the table. This description could be a description of an angry woman but, though less common, it could be someone having a seizure. Unless we make reference to a cognitive element, namely the belief that she or someone else has been wronged, we cannot be sure that the thing under discussion is anger. You can't capture all that there is to an emotion without referring to its component belief. This reveals that emotions contain beliefs.²⁰

2. Emotions contain a cognitive component. That is, emotions include an appropriate belief.²¹

I am not going to offer a detailed defence of 2: I shall just rely on the authority of the existing literature. I will, however, discuss one further issue relating

17. I thank Rebecca Reilly-Cooper for guidance in navigating the philosophical literature on the structure of emotion.

18. There is debate concerning whether the cognitive element must be a belief as opposed to some other cognitive state (like a judgment, 'seeing-as', 'alief', or an 'imagining'). But, for my purposes, it is unnecessary to get into these more fine-grained distinctions: I use the word 'belief' in a broad sense: simply to indicate a cognitive element.

19. See Greenspan 1988; Lyons 1980; Nussbaum 2004; de Sousa 1987.

20. In this paragraph I have borrowed examples and phrasing from Nussbaum (2004: 27).

21. There are other features that a feeling must have to be an emotion (e. g. they must be directed towards some object or state of affairs) but these aren't relevant to my paper.

to 2 because it will be useful for a point I wish to make later. Sometimes we have emotions that contain beliefs we profess not to have (Nussbaum 2004: 11-12). Consider the following example: Mary adamantly declares that she believes her partner is not cheating on her, but she is, nonetheless, seized by fits of jealousy when he doesn't come home from work on time. I think examples like these do have a cognitive explanation. I think that what's going on in this example is that either Mary pretends (to herself and/or others) that she doesn't believe her boyfriend is cheating on her—given the trauma of a break-up, she has a strong incentive to keep up this pretence. Or perhaps she keeps changing her mind as to what she believes. This shows us that people can have emotions that contain beliefs that they're not that sure of, or that aren't consistent with their other beliefs. But, the important point is that Mary's jealousy gives us reason to doubt her claim that she believes her boyfriend is faithful. It does not give us reason to think that emotions don't contain cognitive elements. (One might be able to think of emotions, or feelings, which lack, or seem to lack, a belief. *Perhaps* the fear associated with phobias is one such example. However, this is not the way we typically experience emotions and, thus, need not preoccupy us too much for the purpose of this paper. In any case, I use the word belief broadly (c.f. note xviii)).

3.2. Shame

I shall now outline what one needs to believe to be ashamed. When you feel shame, you are evaluating your personal *qualities* rather than simply an act you've performed. So, for example, if you were to spit on someone's face, if you are ashamed of this, you do not just think 'what I did was rude' but rather '*I am a rude person* for doing that'. Moreover, shame is felt when you believe that you do not possess a personal quality that is important to you. But, the fact that some personal quality is important to you is not enough to mean that you will be ashamed of not having it. It has to be important to you in a specific kind of way. Simply failing to possess a quality that is important to you would normally occasion regret. But it need not occasion shame. For example, you can deeply desire to be able to sing beautifully without feeling ashamed of being a terrible singer. I think this is explained by the thought that shame is felt when one perceives oneself to lack a personal quality that one believes one *ought* to have. The sort of 'ought' I have in mind can be, but is wider than, the moral sort of ought. That is, it's wider than the sort of failure that renders one a morally blameworthy or bad person. But the 'ought' in question must be one that is bound up with something the ashamed person takes to be a serious norm about how she should be (Nussbaum 2004: 204). That is, she must think that the norm has a similar normative force to moral norms. If one thinks that one ought to possess a particular quality, in a way

that is connected to one's serious norms, then, in my terms, one thinks that failing to possess this quality would detract from one's deep value.

I thus propose that

3. In order to feel shame one must believe that one lacks a quality that one believes contributes to one's deep value.²²

Therefore,

4. In order to be ashamed of being untalented, one must believe that marketable natural talents contribute to one's deep value.

It might be helpful to relate deep value and shame to Stephen Darwall's distinction between recognition self-respect and appraisal self-respect (Darwall 1977: 47-19). Recognition self-respect is the sort of respect one should have for oneself solely in virtue of being a person, "a being with a will who acts for reasons" (for example, recognising that one is the sort of being that possess moral rights and duties). Appraisal self-respect, according to Darwall, is felt when one believes one lives up to the standards that it is appropriate for a person to live up to (so, for example, one can lose appraisal self-respect if one believes one is not living up to one's moral duties). He classifies self-esteem as being felt when one possesses a quality that is desired but not connected to the properties that should give rise to recognition respect. It is tempting to say therefore that, according to my classification, one feels ashamed when one lacks appraisal-self respect (and possibly also recognition self-respect but I'll put this to one side). However, using Darwall's definitions, this is a little too narrow: it is plausible to think (at least in contemporary society) that one does not need to be hard-working to be a person and that one does not have a *moral* duty to be hardworking and yet feel ashamed of being lazy. However, for this to be the case they must take hard-workingness to be a virtue of some kind, that is to have some serious normative weight rather than simply being a quality they would like to possess. This is why I argue that shame is tied to one's perceived deep value rather than one's personhood.²³

Someone might think I'm mistaken in saying that shame is bound up with *serious* norms, that is, with what gives a person value in a *deep* way. In ordinary language, people sometimes use the word 'shame' in connection with fairly trivial norms. But the type of shame Wolff has in mind must be shame that's connected to serious norms. If not, then the shame involved in

22. Shame contains other types of belief, but these are not important for my paper.

23. Accepting the ITP is consistent with a person taking, for example, "being a good musician" as forming part of her deep value. It is inconsistent with her believing that the natural talents which help her to be a good musician form part of this deep value.

the shameful revelations allegation would not be very painful and thus lose its bite.

Of course, if forcing ideal luck egalitarian citizens to reveal that their lack of talent will *embarrass* them severely, this is not good news for luck egalitarians. I do not view embarrassment as a (necessarily) lighter version of shame but, rather, as a similar but ultimately different emotion. It can be felt at a range of different intensities. But should luck egalitarians fear an *embarrassing revelations allegation*? Probably not: embarrassment is typically connected to the thought that you have publically done something that is out of place, socially speaking: we feel embarrassed when we publically contravene social norms. By a social norm here, I don't just mean something that is frequently done by members of the society. I mean something that is viewed as perfectly acceptable behaviour by members of the society (and, thus, some behaviours which are fairly unusual are not embarrassing). As such, the things we feel embarrassed about are *highly* dependent on contextual social norms. For example, many British people would be embarrassed (and painfully so) if someone walked in on them going to the toilet. But, in Delhi, people habitually defecate on the street and it is hard to imagine that they are embarrassed by so-doing. In an ideal luck egalitarian society, revealing one's lack of talents will not be socially out of place. It will be the norm: only untalented people will do it, but it will not be something that's viewed as unacceptable, inferior or weird: it will be viewed as people claiming what they're entitled to. Further, though belief in the ITP relates to serious norms and thus shame, rather than embarrassment, one's beliefs about serious norms will surely have some effect on what one gets embarrassed about.²⁴ Thus it seems unlikely that embarrassment at lack of talents would persist in an ideal luck egalitarian society.

Further, there is no reason why a luck egalitarian state would need to force citizens to broadcast their untalentedness to the rest of the nation: one state official would do. And we all know that certain actions are much less embarrassing when performed in front of a contextually appropriate individual (think of a trip to the gynaecologist). My point here is not that genuine or deep embarrassment can't be felt in front of one person or that it does not matter if it is only felt in front of one person. It is, rather, that when there is a *contextually appropriate* individual (or perhaps group), the experience is (for most people) *much less* embarrassing or not even embarrassing at all (and therefore much less painful or not painful at all). This is because of the fact that embarrassment is highly dependent on *contextual* social norms. Minimal embarrassment does not pervasively corrode one's self-respect

24. The ITP is not *merely* an 'officially recognised' norm: it is one that is embraced by citizens (or else the society is not ideal).

—which is the issue at hand in this paper— and is, in my view, a price worth paying for fairness.²⁵

I am not claiming that embarrassment at lack of talents would, *without a shadow of a doubt*, be *completely* eliminated from an ideal luck egalitarian society. However, it is clear that pervasive embarrassment at lack of talents should not be considered a certainty or even particularly likely in such a society. The vague possibility that people will be embarrassed at revealing their lack of talents in an ideal luck egalitarian society is not sufficient reason to dismiss luck egalitarianism. Therefore, luck egalitarians need not fear an embarrassing revelations allegation.

4. SUMMARY

My argument against the shameful revelations allegation thus takes the following form:

1. In an ideal egalitarian society, citizens will firmly embrace the ITP. That is, they will not believe a person's deep value depends on her level of marketable natural talents.
2. Emotions contain a cognitive component. That is, emotions contain an appropriate belief.
3. In order to feel shame one must believe that one lacks a quality that one believes contributes to one's deep value. Therefore:
4. In order to be ashamed of being untalented, one must believe that marketable natural talents contribute to one's deep value.

So my conclusion is

5. Since ideal egalitarian citizens will not believe that marketable natural talents contribute to a person's deep value, they will not be ashamed of being untalented.

25. Perhaps this kind of response could be deployed against the shameful, as opposed to embarrassing, revelations allegation, but I'm sceptical about the possibility. Since shame is dependent on your beliefs about personal value rather than your beliefs about social norms, you could experience equal *shame* at revealing something you thought was shameful in front of a 'contextually appropriate' person as you could by revealing it in public (though, of course, the latter would undoubtedly be more unpleasant for other reasons, for example, you would probably experience humiliation). (Support for this idea can be found in the claim commonly made in the literature that embarrassment and humiliation require an observer (or at least an imagined observer) whereas shame does not. It would be entirely normal to be ashamed about lying to your relative without even thinking about the view of a third party. But it would be utterly bizarre to, say, feel embarrassed about going to the loo without an (at least imaginary) observer).

So revealing that one is untalented would not be shameful in an ideal egalitarian society. Therefore being required to reveal this information to the state in order to claim one's benefits would not undermine ideal egalitarian citizens' self-respect. So the shameful revelations allegation does not mean that unconditional state welfare benefits would be needed in an ideal egalitarian society. This is good news: we may be able to achieve both respect and fairness in an ideal egalitarian society.

5. OBJECTIONS

5.1. Us and Them

One might reasonably wonder whether it's true that most people in our current society think that a person's deep value depends on her talents. If they do not, then, since it's nevertheless true that many people in our current society would be ashamed of admitting that they're too untalented to get a job, this poses a problem for my argument: why would ideal egalitarian citizens be any different? If we asked citizens of our current society outright, 'Do you think a person's value, in a deep sense, is determined by her talents?' chances are that at least some of them would say 'no'. However, I think there are grounds for thinking that many citizens of our current society do *not* believe in the ITP, or at least not in a very full sense. As David Miller warns, 'when focusing on expressed beliefs, we risk picking up what might be called "Sunday-best" beliefs, that is, the views that people think they ought to hold according to some imbibed theory, as opposed to the operational beliefs that would guide them in a practical situation' (Miller 1999: 61-62). I believe that there are strong indications that many current citizens do not fully endorse the ITP. Given the topic of the paper (and the fact that emotions contain a cognitive component), the most obvious thing to say is that the fact that current citizens are ashamed of being untalented shows that they do not fully embrace the ITP. Compare the case of Mary: her jealousy makes us think she doesn't fully believe that her partner is not unfaithful. There are other behaviours that indicate that we don't currently deeply embrace the ITP. For example, we commonly praise children by saying things like 'what a clever girl!', some people will look down their nose at you if don't know, say, who composed *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*²⁶ and some people think that being a talented footballer or musician makes you 'cool'.

26. The fact that knowing who composed *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* doesn't actually show that you're intelligent doesn't matter. Some people (intellectual snobs) seem to think it does show this.

So, given the presence of shame at lack of talents and these other behaviours in current society, it is false to say that (many) current citizens fully embrace the ITP despite saying that they do. I'm not sure exactly how fully citizens must embrace the ITP in order for us to be able to truthfully call the society an ideal egalitarian one. But I do not think that the level to which current citizens do is sufficient. So from the fact that current citizens feel ashamed at lacking talents, it doesn't follow that ideal luck egalitarian citizens would. Since we do not live in an ideal egalitarian society, this is unsurprising.

Nonetheless, one might think that the fact that people in our current society don't firmly endorse the ITP fails to solve the problem. What if there is a reason why current citizens don't fully endorse the ITP that would remain even in an egalitarian society? Stated clearly this objection simply amounts to the charge that an ideal luck egalitarian society would be very difficult to achieve. (Let's call this the *difficulty objection*). But this objection is irrelevant: it has nothing to do with the question of whether people would feel ashamed of being untalented *if* an ideal egalitarian society were achieved. And, in any case, the fact that an ideal luck egalitarian society would be difficult to achieve is not really damaging to luck egalitarian theories because it's not as though their proponents don't know this. (Of course, one could read the objection as being that ideal theory is not worth doing because it is impracticable or non-action guiding but this is a broader methodological objection to ideal theory more generally, and thus is beyond the scope of this paper).

However, I will address a variant of the difficulty objection which states that an ideal society would be difficult to maintain because it would not be any easier for citizens of an egalitarian society to believe firmly in the ITP than it is for citizens of our current society.

I believe there is reason to doubt this idea: although people in our current society might express a belief in the ITP, it could hardly be called a dominant ideal. That is, it does not, in any *major* way, guide our (institutional and other) practices, nor is it frequently mentioned in public discourse. However, this wouldn't be the case in an ideal egalitarian society. It would be a dominant ideal: our institutional, and other, practices would be guided by it. It seems likely, therefore, that the topic would come up more in public discourse. It seems to me that if a particular ideal guides your society's institutional, and other, practices and informs its public discourse, it will be much more likely that this ideal will gain greater prominence in one's own conscious and unconscious beliefs. In other words, the features and background culture of an ideal egalitarian society should make it easier for its citizens to embrace the ITP more fully. I don't think this is controversial: the background features of a person's society obviously influence her beliefs.

It is also worth making explicit that the level of commitment to the ITP that I demand is not as high as it might first appear, making it more feasible. First, I have only been asking ‘would ideal luck egalitarians endorse the ITP in a *full* sense?’. I have not been asking ‘will all traces of any beliefs that contradict the ITP be removed from the mind of ideal egalitarian citizens?’. This makes the depth of the endorsement of the ITP required by ideal egalitarian citizens more feasible.²⁷ Second, in order for the shameful revelations allegation to be put to rest it is not necessary that we must be able to achieve a society where there is no possibility that *even one single person* might not firmly embrace the ITP. It is only necessary that the general ethos of the society makes the great majority of untalented people embrace the ITP. Even if the shame of the few that do not is serious, expecting theories of justice to cater to peoples’ peccadilloes is setting too high a standard.

5.2. The Importance of Careers

Timothy Hinton writes,

It might be objected that Wolff’s worry is too insignificant to be of concern to egalitarians. “After all”, someone might say, “in an egalitarian society, people would have quite different attitudes towards talents from those held by people in our societies. They would view the distribution of talent as being arbitrary from a moral point of view. And hence, untalented people would have no more reason to feel ashamed at having to admit their lack of talent than anyone here and now has to feel ashamed at being brown-eyed or dark-haired”. I do not find this reply persuasive because looks of this kind are too insignificant from a moral standpoint to be compared instructively to talents. People’s career aspirations are intimately related to their talents: one can only realistically entertain certain goals for oneself if one possesses the abilities needed to achieve them. Yet having a successful or happy career is..., at least for many people, a crucial component of leading a decent life. These facts are unlikely to change under egalitarian conditions. Hence, those who were unable to find work when there was plenty of it about would be unable to realize important human aspirations (Hinton 2001: 76-77).

The earlier Wolff (1998: 115) paper also endorses a similar line. However, this line of objection fails. Notice that Hinton has switched the focus of the

27. It is not necessary for all traces of any beliefs that contradict the ITP to be removed from citizens’ minds in order for shame at lack of talents to cease to be a problem. If one only rejects the ITP in a very minimal way, then I doubt we need to be too concerned about any shame occasioned by this. (I assume the more marginal a belief is in one’s conscious or unconscious mind, the weaker any emotion that contains it).

untalented's distress²⁸ from their untalentedness to their lack of a career. However, assuming a roughly similar market in both societies, people who are too untalented to get a job in a luck egalitarian society will also be too untalented to get a job in a society with unconditional welfare benefits. The fact that untalented people will not be able to fulfil the important human aspiration of getting a job is not a problem unique to luck egalitarianism: this fact does not, in itself, give us reason to prefer a system of unconditional state-benefits.

But, one might still have worries: even assuming that the general argument of my paper is correct and citizens would not be ashamed of the *brute fact* that they're untalented, would a luck egalitarian society cause untalented (and unemployed) citizens to feel any significant additional distress compared to a society with unconditional state-benefits? After all, in contrast to untalented citizens of a society with unconditional welfare benefits, untalented citizens of a luck egalitarian society are forced to know *why* they are unemployed. Both Wolff and Hinton claim, therefore, that a system of unconditional state benefits is better for the (involuntarily) unemployed because it allows them to believe that they are unemployed through choice (Hinton 2001: 77; Wolff's 1998: 114). I'll allow that the sense of distress at not having a job is lessened if one believes that one is unemployed through choice.²⁹ But Wolff and Hinton's claim can only plausibly apply to citizens who have applied for no, or very few, jobs: the idea that people who are frequently applying for jobs and being rejected would believe that they were unemployed *through choice* is implausible. In a non-luck egalitarian society, citizens could blame their unemployment on factors other than their lack of talent (e. g. their prospective employers' bad taste). But, this doesn't show that they will be significantly less distressed than they would be in a luck-egalitarian society. If one wants a job and can't get one, then, since it is the job that one wants (and not the talents *per se*), one will be very disappointed *whatever* the reason for one's lack of employment.

Yet an objector might persist: luck egalitarianism forces citizens to give up *hope* of getting a job in a much blunter way than a society with unconditional welfare benefits. (I assume that one is more likely to maintain the hope of getting a job if one blames it on external factors, like prospective employers' bad taste, rather than on one's own untalentedness). However, this isn't necessarily a black mark for luck egalitarianism. An untalented luck egalitar-

28. I'm using the word 'distress' to allow for a broad range of negative emotions, feelings or moods that might be felt due to being unemployed.

29. Although, if one is claiming state benefits and believes that one is unemployed through choice, this might involve believing that one is a 'welfare-scronger', which is surely a potential source of shame for the untalented citizens and resentment and condemnation from other citizens.

ian citizen could dwell, for the rest of her life, on the fact that she's unlikely to get a job. Or she could cut her losses and move on: paid employment is not our only meaningful occupation (think of, for example, studying, family raising and making music).³⁰ In a system of unconditional welfare benefits on the other hand, an untalented citizen is more likely to be unaware that she's unlikely to get a job. Therefore, she may well apply for job after job and then face disappointment after disappointment as she is rejected each time. And, eventually, she will probably realise that she is unlikely to get a job anyway. There are clearly reasons to prefer the former situation, so it is far from settled that unconditional state-benefits are better for the untalented in an ideal egalitarian society.

6. WHAT ABOUT THE REAL WORLD?³¹

Because of the problems Wolff sees in luck egalitarianism, he suggests that egalitarians have at least one reason to campaign for unconditional welfare schemes in real world politics (Wolff 1998: 97).³² I fully accept Wolff's warning: given that in our current society citizens would be ashamed of revealing their lack of talent, we should be careful about campaigning for a conditional state benefits system. Sometimes the best thing to do is to sacrifice a little fairness to maintain respect. But, when we do this, we must remember that fairness *is* sacrificed. We therefore have a reason to inquire as to whether we can find a better arrangement.

In this paper, I have conceded that an ideal luck egalitarian society would be difficult to achieve. But something being difficult to achieve doesn't, without further reflection, mean we shouldn't try to achieve it—especially when what is at stake is, like fairness, important. If what I argue in this paper is correct, a promising way to proceed would be to change peoples' beliefs so that they accept and value themselves (and others) for what they are, rather than just giving up on distributive fairness. We might be able to change peoples' beliefs enough to make their shame shallow or we might be able to change some people's beliefs completely. This proposal is not perfect, but, since we're now talking about the real world, we already know that what we achieve won't be perfect. The point I want to make, however, is that if we opt immediately for an unconditional state benefit system, we might miss an

30. Wolff makes a similar point in the recent paper (2010: 345). He says that discreet meetings with state officials that focus on helping a person come to terms with her untalentedness and building up the talents she has might actually serve to increase self-respect.

31. I would like to note that the arguments of this section are broadly in harmony with the material in Wolff's new paper (2010: esp. 346-7).

32. Though explicitly denies that an unconditional system is necessarily and all-things-considered better in the new paper.

opportunity to minimise the conflict between fairness and respect and so miss an opportunity to make the world more just.

Changing peoples' attitudes towards talents might seem like a utopian dream (Wolff 1998: 115), but it's not as far fetched as one might think. First, history tells us that it is possible to reduce the level of deep-seated societal prejudices (look at the progress we've made with regard to sexism, racism, and homophobia). Second, my evidence here is anecdotal but, one only needs to look at literature surrounding the disability rights movements to see that many of today's disabled people are not ashamed of their disabilities or dependence and, despite their pain and frustration, see their lives as rich and meaningful.³³ Consider this passage from Michael Wenham's autobiographical account of living with a motor neuron disorder:

As adults living in 21st-century Britain, we are invited to measure our value in economic terms. All of us get the message that we are valued for what we do, what we produce, what we contribute to society. Unemployment is the ultimate negation of worth. In *The Full Monty*, the jobless miners make a great discovery: that they have a dignity, they're worth something, even when they are stripped bare. Being inexorably rendered incapable is like undergoing an enforced, prolonged and embarrassing striptease. I can contribute less and less. I cannot even help to lay the table for a meal. The astonishing effect, however, is this: as I do less and "just be" more, those nearest me, starting with my family, value me no less. Indeed, since my self-esteem used to depend in part on what I did, *I feel that I am valued more* (Wenham 2008, my emphasis).

Wenham is not alone. There are numerous disability rights activists out there campaigning for acceptance and respect, whose work is motivated by a deep conviction of the value of disabled persons.³⁴ Of course, not all disabled people are as strong and determined as these campaigners and I do not wish to downplay the internal difficulties (frustration, depression etc.) they face. But my point is simply this: we are not in an ideal egalitarian society now and many disabled individuals clearly view themselves as having equal value to

33. Many physically disabled people can and do work now. Indeed, many in the disability rights movement stress the abilities and employability of disabled people (consider the aptly named group 'Able-disabled'). However, in general, physically disabled people need more resources to facilitate this (for example, carers and specialist equipment). But the key point is that they're not ashamed to campaign for these on the basis of the fact that they lack certain market-relevant talents.

34. To name a couple more examples: Alison Lapper, the British artist with no arms and shortened legs who frequently poses naked for photographs and describes a sculpture of herself naked and pregnant as 'beautiful' (see www.alisonlapper.com). Baroness Jane Campbell of 'Not Dead Yet' campaigns against euthanasia for *only* the terminally ill precisely because she believes that a life full of pain and dependence is a valuable life.

able bodied people and are not ashamed of their disability. It is implausible and unduly pessimistic to assume that we cannot improve upon the levels of prejudice in our current society. It is, therefore, also unduly pessimistic to assume that we can't increase the number of unashamed untalented people. We probably don't need to achieve a totally ideal egalitarian society—that is, a society where every single member fully embraces the ITP—to significantly increase the number of people who are not ashamed at their lack of talent. A society with a better balance of fairness and respect than a society with an unconditional benefits system is surely achievable. We should not give up on this goal.

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