

THE SOCIALISM OF THE RICH: EGALITARIANISM, WEALTH, AND PRIVILEGE IN ACADEMIC PHILOSOPHY

By JOHN MEADOWCROFT*

Abstract: *This essay explains the prevalence of egalitarian beliefs among academic philosophers, individuals who enjoy significant wealth and privilege. I argue that their egalitarianism does not present a “paradox of conviction,” as G. A. Cohen contends, but follows logically from the institutional structure of academic philosophy. This structure creates a “veil of insignificance” wherein philosophy is a moral performance that incentivizes the adoption of egalitarian beliefs. Philosophers also view the world from behind what is termed a “veil of privilege” that incentivizes a public commitment to egalitarianism as a means of distancing themselves from the role of privilege in their life and encourages the hubristic assumption that the practical problems of socialism can be easily overcome with effort or ingenuity. Identity-protective motivated reasoning means that evidence conflicting with egalitarian beliefs is avoided, ignored, or dismissed. These dynamics are reinforced by established actors who gatekeep the profession.*

KEY WORDS: egalitarianism, G. A. Cohen, veil of insignificance, veil of privilege, motivated reasoning

I. INTRODUCTION

G. A. Cohen’s witty title *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?*¹ captures the ostensible inconsistency between his prestigious, well-paid position in academia, where he was, “like most professors, much richer than the average person in my society,”² and his intellectual commitment to economic equality. Cohen acknowledges that most rich egalitarians like himself make no attempt to make society more equal by sharing their personal wealth, creating a “paradox of conviction” between ethical principles and individual behavior.³ He writes:

* Department of Political Economy, King’s College London, john.meadowcroft@kcl.ac.uk. Competing Interests: The author declares none. I thank Kaveh Pourvand, David Schmidt, and an anonymous referee for written comments as well as the other contributors to this volume for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this essay.

¹G. A. Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

²Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian*, 150.

³Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian*, chaps. 1, 10.

doi:10.1017/S0265052523000262

© 2023 Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation. Printed in the USA. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

I am myself a relatively high earner, and, as you will not be surprised to learn, I give away only a fraction of the money that I earn. (By which I don't mean that I give away something like, for example, three quarters of it; I mean a different, more fractional, sort of fraction.)⁴

Rich egalitarians may also entrench social and economic inequalities, if they use their wealth to purchase advantages for their children that are unavailable to children from poorer families. Adam Swift, an egalitarian philosopher who, like Cohen, spent decades as a student and tutor at Oxford, writes of the ostensible “hypocrisy” of “leftish” parents who eschew state education to send their children to fee-paying private schools to guarantee the qualifications necessary for entry to top universities and access to the social and economic advantages that follow.⁵

This apparent contradiction between belief and behavior may be widespread. Egalitarian beliefs are widely held in universities⁶ and in academic philosophy in particular. A recent international survey of philosophers shows that 44 percent report that they accept or lean toward egalitarianism.⁷ Many people hold positions that bestow significant wealth and status, but neither share that prosperity nor act to minimize the social and economic inequalities that result, while espousing egalitarian ideas.

The support of intellectuals for egalitarianism was once controversial within socialist circles. In the nineteenth century attempts were made to remove intellectuals from organizations explicitly intended to represent the interests of industrial workers. Karl Marx, for example, was a principal target of a motion to expel from the First International intellectuals who presumed to know and to share the interests of workers.⁸ Although such attempts at exclusion have long ended, the incongruity of the socialism of the rich has become imprinted on the political culture of many countries in the English, French, and Spanish phrases “champagne socialism,” “gauche caviar,” and “izquierda caviar,” respectively.

Wealthy egalitarians also appear to provide a prima facie refutation of John Rawls's contention—in his construction of the “veil of ignorance”—

⁴ Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 150.

⁵ Adam Swift, *How Not to Be a Hypocrite: School Choice for the Morally Perplexed Parent* (London: Routledge, 2003); Adam Swift, “The Morality of School Choice,” *Theory and Research in Education* 2, no. 1 (2004): 7–21.

⁶ Daniel B. Klein and Charlotta Stern, “Professors and Their Politics,” *Critical Review* 17, nos. 3–4 (2005): 257–303; Daniel B. Klein and Charlotta Stern, “By the Numbers: The Ideological Profile of Professors,” in *The Politically Correct University: Problems, Scope, and Reforms*, ed. Robert Maranto, Richard E. Redding, and Frederick M. Hess (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2009), 15–37; Uwe Peters, Nathan Honeycutt, Andreas De Block, and Lee Jussim, “Ideological Diversity, Hostility, and Discrimination in Philosophy,” *Philosophical Psychology* 33, no. 4 (2020): 511–48.

⁷ “The 2020 PhilPapers Survey,” <https://survey2020.philpeople.org/survey/results/all>. Given that more than 20 percent of respondents did not identify with a normative position, more than half of those who did, accepted or leaned toward egalitarianism.

⁸ Jerome Karabel, “Revolutionary Contradictions: Antonio Gramsci and the Problem of Intellectuals,” *Politics & Society* 6, no. 2 (1976): 123–72.

that a person's socioeconomic position and normative beliefs are interdependent.⁹ According to Rawls, "if a man knew that he was wealthy, he might find it rational to advance the principle that various taxes for welfare measures be counted unjust; if he knew that he was poor, he would most likely propose the contrary principle."¹⁰ Participants in Rawls's hypothetical social contract assume a veil of ignorance so that they know neither their place in society, class position, or social status nor their natural talents and abilities; only from this "original position," in which "no one is in a position to tailor principles to his advantage," could they agree to just ethical principles.¹¹

Just as rich people can evidently hold egalitarian beliefs, poor people may also oppose egalitarianism. Certainly, those at the lower end of the income distribution have not always supported socialist and social-democratic political parties; many shelves of British university libraries have been filled with texts explaining the success of the Conservative Party in repeatedly winning the support of a significant proportion of working-class voters, for example.¹² A crude assumption that the wealthy oppose egalitarianism and poor people support it is clearly inaccurate. This essay aims to contribute to our understanding of these dynamics by explaining the appeal of egalitarianism to academic philosophers with a particular focus on the ideas of Cohen, one of the most important twentieth-century egalitarians who wrote extensively about the relationship between a person's beliefs and their socioeconomic position.

Robert Nozick and Friedrich A. Hayek, two leading twentieth-century opponents of egalitarianism, each propose explanations for the appeal of socialism to wealthy "intellectuals"—that is, professional writers and commentators, such as lecturers, teachers, journalists, novelists, and broadcasters, who regularly engage with ideas.¹³ Nozick and Hayek attribute the appeal of socialism to intellectuals to the specific personality type of those drawn to the world of ideas.

Hayek argues that clever individuals genuinely concerned for others are attracted to the idea that intelligence can be used to solve problems of social organization and make the world a better place.¹⁴ He observes that it is the most able and successful academics who often are socialists:

⁹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), chap. 24.

¹⁰ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 17.

¹¹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 118–21.

¹² For example, see Peter Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics and Philosophy of Inequality* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010); Howard Newby, "The Deferential Dialectic," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, no. 2 (1975): 139–64; Frank Parkin, "Working-Class Conservatives: A Theory of Political Deviance," *The British Journal of Sociology* 18 (1967): 278–90.

¹³ Friedrich A. Hayek, "The Intellectuals and Socialism," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 16, no. 3 (1948): 417–33; Robert Nozick, "Why Do Intellectuals Oppose Capitalism?" in Robert Nozick, *Socratic Puzzles* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), chap. 15.

¹⁴ Hayek, "The Intellectuals and Socialism," 421–26.

Nobody, for instance, who is familiar with large numbers of university faculties ... can remain oblivious to the fact that the most brilliant and successful teachers are today more likely than not to be socialists, while those who hold more conservative political views are as frequently mediocrities.¹⁵

Hayek argues that this reflects the fact that academia is unusually rewarding to talented individuals dissatisfied with the status quo of contemporary societies, whereas the most able conservatives are more likely to pursue careers outside the realm of ideas. Consequently, socialists came to be overrepresented in intellectual professions, creating a culture in which egalitarian ideas are propagated through scholarly, literary, and journalistic products.

Nozick argues that intellectuals are attracted to socialism because they resent the fact that their skills are relatively undervalued in a capitalist society: "contemporary intellectuals feel *entitled* to the highest rewards their society has to offer and *resentful* when they do not receive this."¹⁶ Nozick argues that intellectuals resent a market economy that does not reward verbal intelligence as highly as other contributions and want society to be reorganized like a school in which those who exhibit superior verbal intelligence receive rewards of praise and prizes.¹⁷

Cohen's complaint that although wealthier than the average member of his society, he was "not as rich as Croesus, or as a Rothschild," and, "for various reasons that need not be laid out here, I am quite poor, *as professors go*,"¹⁸ appears consistent with Nozick's claim that the anticapitalist views of many intellectuals reflect resentment at their relative position in capitalist society. However, Hayek's and Nozick's claims that intellectuals have a particular personality type that leads to their commitment to socialism is at best unproven and at worst wrong. It is surely more plausible that intellectuals, like the rest of the population, have a range of personalities and that people with personalities fitting Hayek's and Nozick's depictions both support and oppose capitalism.

In this essay I offer an alternative explanation for the predominance of egalitarian views among academic philosophers, individuals who constitute a particularly important subset of intellectuals because it is their ideas that percolate through the culture and inform the writings of those Hayek terms the "secondhand dealers in ideas."¹⁹ I argue that egalitarian views predominate among philosophers because of structural features of academic philosophy, not the personalities of participants. Once the

¹⁵ Hayek, "The Intellectuals and Socialism," 427.

¹⁶ Nozick, "Why Do Intellectuals Oppose Capitalism?" 286.

¹⁷ Nozick, "Why Do Intellectuals Oppose Capitalism?" 286–93.

¹⁸ Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 150 (emphasis in original).

¹⁹ Hayek, "The Intellectuals and Socialism," 417–18.

institutional dynamics are understood, then the salient question becomes: Why aren't all academic philosophers egalitarians?

Section II sets out Cohen's claim that political philosophy should involve identifying fact-insensitive metaethical principles without regard to empirical considerations. I then argue in Section III that this approach creates an institutional context resembling Hartmut Kliemt's "veil of insignificance" where choices made without concern for practical consequences are a moral performance that incentivizes the adoption of egalitarian beliefs. I then argue in Section IV that the socioeconomic status of academic philosophers involves them viewing the world through a "veil of privilege." Privileged individuals often seek to distance themselves from the role of privilege in their lives and a public commitment to egalitarianism serves such a distancing strategy. The experience of advancing through life with relative ease and successfully navigating public-sector bureaucracies may also produce a naïve confidence that society can easily be reorganized in accordance with egalitarian principles. I then show in Section V that this normative commitment to egalitarianism incentivizes motivated reasoning in which evidence that conflicts with a person's beliefs is avoided, ignored, and dismissed. I next argue in Section VI that the gatekeeping role performed by a small number of established actors within academic philosophy reinforces and reproduces the dominance of egalitarian beliefs.

II. FACTS VERSUS PRINCIPLES

Cohen traces his personal commitment to egalitarianism to his "strongly political upbringing" in a Jewish, communist family in Montreal in the 1940s and 1950s.²⁰ He recognizes that his childhood in a strongly political environment was similar to a deeply religious one, with a commitment to Marxism instilled as others have religious beliefs inculcated. Cohen believes that the fundamental moral equality of persons demands "Marxist equality," wherein each person contributes according to their abilities and receives according to their needs. In this vision of an egalitarian society everyone might not have identical resources, but economic equality is achieved in the sense that each individual is said to receive what he or she needs.²¹

Later in his career, Cohen describes his egalitarianism as a fact-insensitive metaethical position held irrespective of "facts about human social organization."²² This reflects a distinction between fact-sensitive principles that may be revised in the light of knowledge about the world and fact-insensitive principles that are independent of empirical considerations.²³ A person's view of the morality of abortion, for example, may be fact-sensitive, if it could be changed by new knowledge about when a fetus

²⁰ Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 7.

²¹ Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 114.

²² G. A. Cohen, "Facts and Principles," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2003): 213.

²³ Cohen, "Facts and Principles," 211–45.

becomes a viable human person, but it is fact-insensitive, if it is based on the belief that it is wrong to “take lives of creatures with human-like features.”²⁴ Cohen contends that every fact-sensitive principle is ultimately reducible to a fact-insensitive one, that is, fact-insensitive principles are required to ground and evaluate fact-sensitive ones.²⁵

As a fact-insensitive principle, Cohen’s egalitarianism does not follow from concern about the hardship resulting from poverty. In his view the moral importance of equality is unrelated to the level of absolute or relative deprivation; equality is as important in a society in which some people starve while others enjoy sumptuous luxury as it is in one in which every person owns at least one yacht but some own six.²⁶ The ethical primacy of equality makes it the lens through which all moral theories should be evaluated. Hence, Cohen criticizes Rawls’s theory of justice—wherein inequalities are tolerated if they benefit the least advantaged—for failing to recognize the overriding moral importance of equality.²⁷

Cohen contends that it is possible to commit to egalitarianism as a meta-ethical theory and to bring that theory to bear on alternative moral beliefs, even if there are no practical consequences: “the question for political philosophy is not what we should do but what we should think, even when what we should think makes no practical difference.”²⁸ Cohen does not think that political philosophy is pointless, of course, but that it involves the derivation and evaluation of fact-insensitive principles independent of empirical considerations.

Nicholas Vrousalis argues that Cohen’s aim in promoting metaethical analysis independent of empirics is to save pluralism in political philosophy from “the juggernaut of empirical reality.”²⁹ If only those ideas that could satisfy empirical standards survive, then political philosophy would become a narrow discipline shorn of many of its analytical tools.³⁰ Cohen’s position, though, also demonstrates considerable sensitivity about the likely outcome of applying empirical considerations to his normative beliefs; empirical reality appears as a juggernaut only to those ideas that cannot withstand exposure to the real world. Hence, Cohen’s approach was intended to have important implications for the practice of philosophy and he (correctly) envisioned that philosophy done in this way prompts egalitarian conclusions.

²⁴ Cohen, “Facts and Principles,” 232.

²⁵ Cohen, “Facts and Principles,” 214–15.

²⁶ G. A. Cohen, “Incentives, Inequality, and Community,” *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Volume 13 (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1992), 266–68; Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian*, chap. 6.

²⁷ Cohen, “Incentives, Inequality, and Community,” 268–70; Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian*, chaps. 8, 9.

²⁸ Cohen, “Facts and Principles,” 243.

²⁹ Nicholas Vrousalis, *The Political Philosophy of G. A. Cohen* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 8.

³⁰ Vrousalis, *Political Philosophy of G. A. Cohen*, 6–8.

III. THE VEIL OF INSIGNIFICANCE

Philosophical inquiry separated from empirical considerations takes place not in a vacuum, but in a context that resembles Kliemt's description of a "veil of insignificance."³¹ The veil of insignificance describes "low cost situations" in which an individual believes their decisions have "only a negligible effect on expected outcomes" or a person has "no direct interest in the outcome because she or he will hardly be influenced by the outcome."³² In such situations, the choice between different alternatives is insignificant to the choosing individual because the outcome does not affect their future well-being.

Kliemt's depiction of the veil of insignificance builds upon Anthony Downs's classic insight in his "economic theory of democracy" that it is irrational for voters to invest time becoming well-informed about politics because the impact of each individual vote on the outcome of an election is infinitesimally small. Consequently, "rationally ignorant" voters cast expressive ballots to signal vague preferences, values, or opinions rather than vote to elect a candidate or party based on careful analysis of their policies, which explains why democratic electorates frequently make decisions that reduce their welfare.³³

Following Downs's logic, Kliemt argues that if an individual believes that a decision would have a negligible impact on their well-being, then they are likely to view it "as a resource to express opinions rather than as a resource to bring about calculated effects."³⁴ A decision taken behind a veil of insignificance is a symbolic act—that is, an opportunity to performatively demonstrate one's moral standing to oneself and others.³⁵

If philosophy involves metaethical reflection without regard to the practical consequences of ideas, then the choice between alternatives becomes insignificant in the sense Kliemt describes. Philosophizing becomes a low-cost situation without empirical consequences and, therefore, a moral performance in which the appearance of the beliefs adopted is all-important. There are then powerful incentives to choose an intuitively morally satisfying position, even if it is wholly impractical. Cohen's claim that political philosophy ultimately concerns questions of personal morality, and his description of his own commitment to egalitarianism as "a matter of

³¹ Hartmut Kliemt, "The Veil of Insignificance," *European Journal of Political Economy* 2, no. 3 (1986): 333–44.

³² Kliemt, "The Veil of Insignificance," 333.

³³ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1957). Geoffrey Brennan and Loren Lomasky, *Democracy and Decision* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1993), should be credited with emphasizing the importance of expressive voting with the Downsian framework.

³⁴ Kliemt, "The Veil of Insignificance," 338.

³⁵ Kliemt, "The Veil of Insignificance," 338–40.

personal attitude and choice,"³⁶ are consistent with philosophizing as a personal, moral performance.

The veil of insignificance is a context wherein people engage in virtue-signaling and moral grandstanding—that is, individual acts are intended to win favor with others via the demonstration of moral character to enhance one's moral reputation.³⁷ Virtue-signaling and moral grandstanding are acts that have no direct negative consequences but aim to gain the benefits of the (perhaps imagined) approval of others. Academic philosophers working on moral questions behind a veil of insignificance may be particularly susceptible to virtue-signaling and moral grandstanding because they are required to adopt normative positions that others will then judge.

Egalitarian views are likely to be selected behind a veil of insignificance because, absent empirical considerations, economic equality satisfies powerful moral intuitions. The idea that people have equal moral worth is a (near-)universal metaethical principle. Even John Kekes's objection that individual conduct reflects important differences of character from which different moral worth should follow,³⁸ assumes moral equality until differences of character have been revealed. It is reasonable to want to pursue this belief in moral equality to its logical conclusion and, absent empirical information, economic equality appears to be its fullest possible realization. A world in which everyone has the same material resources or receives resources appropriate to their needs has a powerful intuitive appeal. Indeed, Nozick argues that if income and wealth were manna from heaven that fell from the sky unowned, then it would be appropriate to distribute it according to an egalitarian principle.³⁹ It is knowledge of how particular holdings of income and wealth came about and of the likely consequences of seeking to realize an equal distribution that plausibly leads to the rejection of egalitarianism.⁴⁰ Without empirical facts about the world, economic equality would appear to be morally required and to be the appropriate ethical standard against which other moral theories should be judged.

IV. THE VEIL OF PRIVILEGE

The vast majority of academics come from families with high social and economic status and enter a profession that replicates and reinforces that position. A recent study found that, in the United States, faculty members across academic disciplines are from families with a median childhood

³⁶ Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, x.

³⁷ James Bartholomew, "Easy Virtue," *The Spectator*, April 18, 2015, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/easy-virtue/>; Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, *Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

³⁸ John Kekes, *The Illusions of Egalitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), chap. 6.

³⁹ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 198–99.

⁴⁰ Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, esp. chap. 7; Friedrich A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty, Volume 2: The Mirage of Social Justice* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

household income 23 percent higher than average and were twenty-five times more likely than the general population to have a parent with a Ph.D. These disparities increase markedly at more prestigious universities and have been stable for fifty years.⁴¹ A recent study similarly shows that university teaching is one of the most elite occupations in Britain, with 63 percent of those employed in higher education having at least one parent from an upper-middle-class background.⁴² The authors conclude: "Our results suggest that the professoriate is, and has remained, accessible disproportionately to the socioeconomically privileged."⁴³

Privilege has been defined as "like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks" that some people possess but do not perceive, enabling them to pass through the world and overcome life's challenges with relative ease.⁴⁴ Privilege is usually attributed to white people and to white men in particular, whose race and sex enable them to unproblematically traverse situations that women and people of color find filled with obstacles.⁴⁵ High social and economic status may engender uniquely strong feelings of entitlement that lead people to underestimate the role of their privilege in their achievements.⁴⁶ It may be appropriate to say that those with high status view the world through a "veil of privilege" that obscures important information and leads them to misperceive the nature of social reality.

Privilege is often described as invisible because its precise role in a person's life may be imperceptible to that person, but the beneficiaries of privilege may nevertheless have some sense that their position at least in part results from unearned advantages conferred by their sex, race, or socioeconomic background. This knowledge may lead privileged individuals consciously or unconsciously to distance themselves from sociological categories associated with privilege.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Allison C. Morgan, Nicholas LaBerge, Daniel B. Larremore, Mirta Galesic, Jennie E. Brand, and Aaron Clauset, "Socioeconomic Roots of Academic Faculty," *Nature Human Behaviour* 6 (2022): 1625–33.

⁴² Heather Carey, Dave O'Brien, and Olivia Gable, *Social Mobility in the Creative Economy*, Policy Review Series: Class in the Creative Industries, Paper No. 03 (September 2021), 12, - <https://creative-pec.files.svdccdn.com/production/assets/publications/PEC-report-Social-mobility-in-the-Creative-Economy-Sept-2021.pdf>.

⁴³ Morgan et al., "Socioeconomic Roots of Academic Faculty," 1625.

⁴⁴ Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Anna May Filor (Schenectady, NY: New York State Council of Educational Institutions, 1992), 30.

⁴⁵ McIntosh, "White Privilege," 30–36.

⁴⁶ Stéphanie Côté, Jennifer E. Stellar, Robb Willer, Rachel C. Forbes, Sean R. Martin, and Emily C. Bianchi, "The Psychology of Entrenched Privilege: High Socioeconomic Status Individuals from Affluent Backgrounds Are Uniquely High in Entitlement," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 47, no. 1 (2021): 70–88.

⁴⁷ Eric D. Knowles, Brian S. Lowery, Rosalind M. Chow, and Miguel M. Unzueta, "Deny, Distance, or Dismantle? How White Americans Manage a Privileged Identity," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 9, no. 6 (2014): 594–609. Other strategies for managing privilege include denying the existence of privilege or working to dismantle the system of privilege.

One distancing strategy is to create and recite “origin stories” that emphasize a person’s humble beginnings and upward mobility against the odds, thereby erasing the role of structural advantages in their success.⁴⁸ Cohen’s autobiographical writings are a paradigmatic example of a distancing self-narrative that emphasizes humble origins and erases the role of privilege in his life. Cohen stresses that he was “brought up ... in the working-class, Jewish part of Montreal,” not the “upper-middle-class Jewish part.”⁴⁹ He writes that his parents both had “impeccably proletarian pedigree,” although he hints that his background was different from that of most working-class children, when acknowledging that his mother’s family had been “quite well-heeled” but she had “tumbled down the class ladder to a proletarian position” after emigrating from Russia to Canada.⁵⁰

Cohen’s socialist beliefs are an important component of this distancing strategy. The “proletarian” nature of his socioeconomic background is emphasized, suggesting that his rise from humble beginnings and his egalitarianism are intrinsically connected. It is also significant that within Cohen’s egalitarianism, sex and race—the two categories of privilege he could not assimilate within his origin story—are reduced to effective irrelevance as minor subcategories of class exploitation.⁵¹

Philosophizing behind a veil of insignificance maximizes the opportunity to select beliefs that enable normative distancing from privilege. Individuals may adopt beliefs that ostensibly reject their privilege but do not require any eschewal of the advantages and benefits of privilege. An empirical study of white, male undergraduates at prestigious American universities, for example, found that many espoused egalitarian views ostensibly in conflict with their privileged social position and future career plans, but without any apparent awareness of this inconsistency.⁵² On the contrary, holding egalitarian views enables the individual to receive the benefits of privilege while simultaneously distancing themselves from it.

Cohen remained committed to egalitarianism without making any personal financial sacrifice to make society more equal, as he acknowledges, and while enjoying the benefits of holding one of the most prestigious academic positions in the world at a university that for decades was accused of de facto exclusion of individuals from ethnic minorities and poor

⁴⁸ Sam Friedman, Dave O’Brien, and Ian McDonald, “Deflecting Privilege: Class Identity and the Intergenerational Self,” *Sociology* 55, no. 4 (2021): 716–33.

⁴⁹ Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian*, 11; Cohen states in six places in this book that he came from a working-class background: 1, 11, 21, 34, 42, 150.

⁵⁰ Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian*, 21.

⁵¹ Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian*, 110; G. A. Cohen, “Equality as Fact and as Norm: Reflections on the (Partial) Demise of Marxism,” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 83–84, (1994): 6–7.

⁵² Michael Alan Sacks and Marika Lindholm, “A Room without a View: Social Distance and the Structuring of Privileged Identity,” in *Working Through Whiteness: International Perspectives*, ed. Cynthia Levine-Rasky (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), chap. 5.

backgrounds from its student body.⁵³ Cohen's public commitment to egalitarianism was plausibly part of a distancing strategy that made this intellectually and psychologically possible.

The veil of privilege may also encourage adoption of egalitarian beliefs, if the life experience of privileged individuals leads to the hubristic assumption that practical obstacles to one's objectives can easily be surmounted with effort or ingenuity. In academic philosophy this may lead to the belief that the empirical challenges of creating an egalitarian society can be straightforwardly overcome. Indeed, Cohen's analysis of philosophical problems is usually careful and insightful, but his writing on the practical problems of creating an equal society is often flippant and superficial.

Cohen uses the analogies of a jazz band,⁵⁴ a camping trip,⁵⁵ and recipe writing⁵⁶ to describe the organization of an imagined egalitarian future: "the principal problem with the socialist ideal is that we do not know how to design the machinery that would make it run," so that "our problem is a problem of *design* ... a design problem, so I think, is what we've got."⁵⁷ For Cohen, the challenge of achieving socialism is akin to building a bridge across a wide river or constructing a tall skyscraper—a technical design problem solvable by intelligent, able people.

People with high status and strong interpersonal skills are also more likely to be able successfully to navigate public-sector bureaucracies than are those with low status and weaker interpersonal skills. Individuals capable of successfully managing relationships with frontline public-sector workers will find government bureaucracies responsive to their needs, whereas those who struggle to manage those relationships may be denied benefits and subject to sanctions.⁵⁸ There is evidence that the U.K. National Health Service, for example, has prioritized conditions that affect middle-class individuals (such as Parkinson's) at the expense of those that

⁵³ Michael Donnelly, "The Road to Oxbridge: Schools and Elite University Choices," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 62, no. 1 (2014): 57–72; Anthony Kelly, "A New Composite Measure of Ethnic Diversity: Investigating the Controversy over Minority Ethnic Recruitment at Oxford and Cambridge Universities," *British Educational Research Journal* 45, no. 1 (2019): 41–82.

⁵⁴ G. A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 122–23. This was specifically an analogy of Marx's vision of communism with superabundance.

⁵⁵ G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), chaps. I–II.

⁵⁶ Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 77. This phrasing responds to Marx's argument for the importance of analyzing contemporary capitalism over "writing recipes for the cook-shops of the future." Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1* (London: Penguin, 1976), 99.

⁵⁷ Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* 57–58 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁸ Lael R. Keiser, "Understanding Street-Level Bureaucrats' Decision-Making: Determining Eligibility in the Social Security Disability Program," *Public Administration Review* 70, no. 2 (2010): 247–57; Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980); Bernardo Zacka, *When the State meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

disproportionately affect poorer citizens (such as lung cancer).⁵⁹ Another particularly poignant example occurred during the initial COVID-19 pandemic, when individuals with learning difficulties suffered a mortality rate six times higher than the general U.K. population at least in part because, without the presence of caregivers to advocate on their behalf, they often did not receive adequate hospital treatment.⁶⁰

Swift's defense of state education mentioned above may similarly rest on a skewed perception of state schools indicative of the veil of privilege. In the U.K., placement in state schools is allocated principally on the basis of geographical location, which means that children of academics living in the most salubrious parts of university towns will almost certainly attend high-performing state schools.⁶¹ High-status parents will also be able to formally and informally negotiate with teachers to influence the quality of education provided, whereas poorer parents whose children attend low-performing state schools—often located in the most deprived parts of major towns and cities—may struggle to articulate concerns about their children's education in ways that are taken seriously by educational professionals.

The unrepresentative experience of privileged individuals within public-sector bureaucracies may lead to an overestimation of the efficacy of government services. This misperception may foster the belief that political institutions can correct economic inequalities, when in reality government bureaucracies may perpetuate and amplify unequal outcomes. Conversely, people who struggle to navigate public-sector organizations and may be subject to sanction by street-level bureaucrats, will plausibly have less confidence in the ability of such institutions to reduce or mediate inequalities. Accordingly, the veil of privilege may encourage support for

⁵⁹ John Meadowcroft, "Patients, Politics, and Power: Government Failure and the Politicization of U.K. Health Care," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 33, no. 5 (2008): 427–44.

⁶⁰ House of Commons Health and Social Care, and Science and Technology Committees, *Coronavirus: Lessons Learned to Date, Sixth Report of the Health and Social Care Committee and Third Report of the Science and Technology Committee of Session 2021–2022* (London: House of Commons, 2021), 100–101:

Some of the guidance in place around hospital visiting during the pandemic has also had an impact on the quality of care that people with learning disabilities have experienced. In normal circumstances, people with learning disabilities who have to attend hospital can be accompanied by a family member or carer who is able to help them communicate with health staff if necessary. Yet due to infection control measures in hospitals, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, some carers and advocates for people with learning disabilities were not allowed to attend hospital... It is important for people with learning disabilities, and especially those who may have trouble communicating or are entirely non-verbal, that they can be accompanied by family or a carer who is able to advocate on their behalf. We heard that not having access to this support during the pandemic could have a real impact on the quality of care that people with learning disabilities receive.

⁶¹ James Tooley, "From Adam Swift to Adam Smith: How the 'Invisible Hand' Overcomes Middle Class Hypocrisy," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 41, no. 4 (2007): 732, makes this point implicitly.

egalitarian politics by leading people wrongly to believe that government provision of goods and services can unproblematically promote equality.

V. COMMITMENT TO MOTIVATED REASONING

The complete failure of attempts to achieve socialism in the twentieth century cannot escape the notice of contemporary academics—not even committed egalitarians. Cohen himself acknowledges “Marxism’s failure in the twentieth century” and the “history of socialist failure” in putting egalitarian ideas into practice.⁶² However, the real-world failure of egalitarianism has shaken few scholars’ normative commitments because they engage in motivated reasoning that leads them to avoid, ignore, or dismiss empirical evidence inconsistent with their beliefs.

People have an innate tendency to seek out, value, and remember information that supports prior beliefs and preconceptions and to avoid, ignore, or dismiss contradictory evidence. This motivated reasoning is ubiquitous to human thinking, but its influence varies depending on a person’s openness to the possibility that their views may require revision in the light of new information.⁶³ An important source of motivated reasoning is “identity-protective cognition,” which is the protection from external challenge of values and beliefs core to a person’s identity. Information that might challenge core beliefs is disregarded as being from unreliable, unknowledgeable, or untrustworthy sources. Identity-protective cognition may be particularly important to maintaining political beliefs central to a person’s self-image and group membership.⁶⁴ Hence, Charles Taber and Milton Lodge show motivated reasoning to be an important cause of political polarization in the United States as groups with different opinions attribute importance to different information, making reconciliation of opposing viewpoints increasingly difficult.⁶⁵

A public, professional commitment to egalitarianism will be central to an academic philosopher’s identity. Cohen’s autobiographical writings leave little doubt that egalitarianism was core to his identity; his entire personal history was told through the lens of his lifelong commitment to

⁶² Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian*, x, 77.

⁶³ Ziva Kunda, “Motivated Inference: Self-Serving Generation and Evaluation of Causal Theories,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53, no. 4 (1987): 636–47; Ziva Kunda, “The Case for Motivated Reasoning,” *Psychological Bulletin* 108, no. 3 (1990): 480–98; Arie Kruglanski and Donna Webster, “Motivated Closing of the Mind: ‘Seizing’ and ‘Freezing,’” *Psychological Review* 103, no. 2 (1996): 263–83.

⁶⁴ Geoffrey L. Cohen, “Party Over Policy: The Dominating Impact of Group Influence on Political Beliefs,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85, no. 5 (2003): 808–22; Geoffrey L. Cohen, David K. Sherman, Anthony Bastardi, Lillian Hsu, Michelle McGoey, and Lee Ross, “Bridging the Partisan Divide: Self-Affirmation Reduces Ideological Closed-Mindedness and Inflexibility in Negotiation,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 93, no. 3 (2007): 415–30.

⁶⁵ Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, “Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006): 755–69.

egalitarianism.⁶⁶ Moreover, Cohen was unapologetically certain that no conceivable empirical evidence could shake his belief in Marxist equality⁶⁷ and, therefore, he was evidently willing to engage in identity-protective cognition to maintain this belief.

The failure of real-world socialism has been widely attributed to the inability of a planned economy to operate with tolerable efficiency in the absence of market prices⁶⁸ and material incentives.⁶⁹ In his later work, Cohen nominally engages with these challenges, but as noted above, whereas his treatment of philosophical questions is thoughtful and meticulous, his empirical analysis is often shallow and dismissive. In *Why Not Socialism?* Cohen acknowledges “the infirmities of comprehensive planning” and that “market socialism,” combining collective ownership of the means of production with consumer markets, is likely to be a necessary feature of a future egalitarian society.⁷⁰ However, Cohen does not engage with empirical evidence of the performance of socialist economies that adopted what is essentially market socialism after the early failure of central planning.⁷¹

An important target of Cohen’s philosophical writings is Rawls’s contention that the pursuit of economic equality could lead to a decline in productivity that would harm the least advantaged and, therefore, justice demands tolerance of some inequalities to ensure a satisfactory level of production: “each society has a redistribution policy which if pushed beyond a certain point weakens incentives and thereby lowers production.”⁷² Cohen vehemently objects and holds that accepting some inequality to ensure financial incentives is inconsistent with the ethos of equality built into the original position that was supposed to foster a universal commitment to a just society.⁷³ Cohen argues that Rawls’s (and others’) concerns about free-

⁶⁶ Notably, Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian*, chaps. 1, 2, 10.

⁶⁷ Cohen, “Facts and Principles,” 211–45.

⁶⁸ The classic accounts of the problem are Ludwig von Mises, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth* (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1990); Friedrich A. Hayek, “Socialist Calculation: The Competitive ‘Solution,’” *Economica* 7, no. 26 (1940): 125–49; Friedrich A. Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” *American Economic Review* 35, no. 4 (1945): 519–30.

⁶⁹ For example, Michael Hechter, “Theoretical Implications of the Demise of State Socialism,” *Theory and Society* 23, no. 2 (1994): 155–67; Martin Loeb and Wesley A. Magat, “Success Indicators in the Soviet Union: The Problem of Incentives and Efficient Allocations,” *The American Economic Review* 68, no. 1 (1978): 173–81; Andrei Shleifer and Robert Vishny, “Pervasive Shortages under Communism,” *RAND Journal of Economics* 23, no. 2 (1992): 237–46.

⁷⁰ Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* chap. IV.

⁷¹ Peter J. Boettke, *Calculation and Coordination* (London: Routledge, 2001), chaps. 1–2; Don Lavoie, *Rivalry and Central Planning: The Socialist Calculation Debate Reconsidered* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1985), chap. 5; David Ramsay Steele, *From Marx to Mises: Post-Capitalist Society and the Challenge of Economic Calculation* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1992), chaps. 7–8.

⁷² Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 142.

⁷³ Cohen, *Incentives, Inequality, and Community*; G. A. Cohen, “The Pareto Argument for Inequality,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 12, no. 1 (1995): 160–85. See also Vrousalis, *The Political Philosophy of G. A. Cohen*, 74–78, 104–8.

riding reflect a mistaken, pessimistic view of human nature wherein it is contended that “socialism is infeasible” because “people are ... by nature insufficiently generous and cooperative to meet its requirements.”⁷⁴ Cohen points to counterevidence that people are moved by other-regarding (as well as selfish) considerations, indicating that pecuniary incentives are unnecessary to ensure adequate levels of production.⁷⁵ Cohen’s argument reveals confirmation bias consistent with motivated reasoning. Nonmonetary factors can motivate people, such as the incentives in academic philosophy that lead to the adoption of egalitarian beliefs. However, as his own “paradox of conviction” indicates, the evidence shows that idealism is a relatively weak incentive when it involves personal costs and produces minimal or uncertain benefits. Wealthy egalitarians and the citizens of socialist states may be reluctant to make personal sacrifices for equality, if their altruism will make little difference to the overall social outcome. Cohen’s recognition of his own failure to make personal sacrifices for equality, despite his strong normative commitment, is conspicuous evidence of the limits of idealistic motivation, though his prior normative commitment prevented him from drawing this rather glaring conclusion.

Some contemporary egalitarians claim to have revised their ideas after taking seriously the real-world failure of socialism. Elizabeth Anderson’s theory of relational equality, for example, explicitly recognizes that those who foresee a role for markets in a future advanced economy may have been persuaded by “the objection that egalitarianism does not appreciate the virtues of markets as efficient allocative mechanisms.”⁷⁶ Anderson’s subsequent account of relational equality, though, shows no evidence of learning from the fateful history of attempts to replace markets with economic planning. Rather, she argues that equal respect among citizens demands the reorganization of the economy to ensure that everyone receives “fair value for one’s labor,” with “fair value” to be defined by participants in democratic deliberation.⁷⁷ This demand is presented as innocuous, but it implies at the very least a form of market socialism in which distributional outcomes are subject to political control.⁷⁸ Anderson does not consider whether prices would continue to perform their informational function or what incentives would operate, if it were democratically decided that, for example, presently low-skilled, low-paid occupations should receive a “fair” reward equivalent to the salaries presently paid to the highest earners.

Anderson argues that the reorganization of society according to egalitarian principles follows from an appreciation that an advanced economy is

⁷⁴ Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* 55.

⁷⁵ Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* 55–60.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?” *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999): 292.

⁷⁷ Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?” 318.

⁷⁸ Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?” 287–95. Anderson is explicit that her analysis does not imply an argument for a welfare system combined with a market economy, but rather, the comprehensive reorganization of society in accordance with egalitarian principles.

ultimately a cooperative venture involving the collaboration of millions of people. Understanding the extent and depth of economic interdependence should lead workers to accept “interpersonal justification” as the basis for economic decision-making—that is, “any consideration offered as a reason for a policy must serve to justify that policy when uttered by anyone to anyone else who participates in the economy as a worker or consumer.”⁷⁹ The notion that an advanced economy could operate in a context where production, consumption, and distribution decisions require prior political approval again demonstrates a failure to appreciate the limits of economic planning and the evidence that economic coordination at the societal level must involve spontaneous processes that utilize the informational function of market prices.⁸⁰ Anderson’s argument for economic planning and social reorganization to achieve relational equality is founded on motivated reasoning wherein information contrary to prior beliefs is neglected, ignored, or dismissed, while confirmatory information is presented as decisive, unassailable, and convincing.

Swift’s analysis of parental choice in schooling also bears the imprint of motivated reasoning. He claims that his argument for the abolition of private education is “about the moral quality of personal and collective decisions and much of the argument ... is devoid of empirical content.”⁸¹ In practice, however, he presents empirical evidence but excludes that which challenges his prior normative commitment to state education. Swift holds that a parent may believe that “the existence of the private sector is bad for those who go to state schools, and bad in a way that makes her local state school unacceptably inadequate. Without private schools, the state school would be good enough. With them, it is inadequate.”⁸² However, given that, as Swift notes, only 7 percent of U.K. children (the principal focus of his work) attend private schools,⁸³ his failure to consider why the absence of such a small number of children (albeit, relatively privileged children) caused systemic failure in the state sector is conspicuous. Perhaps he does not consider the possibility that the poor performance of state schools may be caused by intrinsic features of public education⁸⁴ because the

⁷⁹ Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?” 322.

⁸⁰ Mises, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth*; Hayek, “Socialist Calculation”; Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society”; Lavoie, *Rivalry and Central Planning*; Paul Seabright, *The Company of Strangers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Steele, *From Marx to Mises*.

⁸¹ Swift, “The Morality of School Choice,” 9. For a careful, critical analysis of Swift’s argument on its own terms, see Tooley, “From Adam Swift to Adam Smith,” 727–41.

⁸² Swift, “The Morality of School Choice,” 10.

⁸³ Swift, “The Morality of School Choice,” 8.

⁸⁴ On the possibility that state education has inherent pathologies, see Mark Pennington, “Against Democratic Education,” *Social Philosophy & Policy* 31, no. 1 (2014): 1–35; James Tooley, *Reclaiming Education* (London: Continuum, 2000); James Tooley, Pauline Dixon, and Olanrewaju Olaniyan, “Private and Public Schooling in Low-Income Areas of Lagos State, Nigeria: A Census and Comparative Survey,” *International Journal of Education Research* 43, no. 3 (2005): 125–46.

identification of inherent pathologies of state education would logically lead his argument for leveling the educational playing field to become an argument for abolishing state, not private, schools so as to grant all children access to superior private education.

VI. THE INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE OF ACADEMIC PHILOSOPHY

The powerful incentives to adopt egalitarian beliefs in academic philosophy are reinforced by the institutional structure of departments and units in universities, colleges, and research centers in which it takes place. In this institutional setting the views of established actors are crucial to determining who is appointed to permanent positions that bestow careers in academic philosophy and, thereby, what questions are pursued and what perspectives considered important.

Competition for permanent positions in academic philosophy is fierce—every year there are far more graduates from philosophy Ph.D. programs than there are jobs available. The American Philosophical Association advice for philosophy job candidates states: “Job seekers should recognize that the number of academic jobs in philosophy is exceeded by several times the number of candidates.”⁸⁵ Aaron Clauet and others show that in the U.S. recruitment across academic disciplines is dominated by a small number of prestigious departments that supply the vast majority of tenured faculty.⁸⁶ Key gatekeepers to an academic career are therefore established academics at elite institutions who admit students to top-rated Ph.D. programs, supply recommendations for job candidates, and edit the journals and book series that are the key benchmarks of scholarly success. Clauet and his colleagues show that these elite networks work to minimize socio-economic diversity in academia,⁸⁷ and it is surely plausible that they also minimize intellectual diversity.

The promotion and replication of egalitarianism in academic philosophy is likely to begin early in a person’s career and continue throughout the journey to a permanent position. Egalitarians will likely teach metaethical thinking to successive generations of students and respond to those students’ ideas from this moral position. Ideological reinforcement does not require that anti-egalitarian views meet with explicit hostility, although that may happen, but that egalitarian contributions receive subtle encouragement that fosters those students’ belief in the correctness of their views and their aptitude for philosophy. When students apply to graduate school, applications that are consistent with senior actors’ views of the most salient questions and the most important normative perspectives may receive a

⁸⁵ “Guidance for Philosophy Job Seekers,” American Philosophical Association, https://www.apaonline.org/page/guidance_job_seekers.

⁸⁶ Aaron Clauet, Samuel Arbesman, and Daniel B. Larremore, “Systematic Inequality and Hierarchy in Faculty Hiring Networks,” *Science Advances* 1, no. 1 (2015): 1–6.

⁸⁷ Clauet, Arbesman, and Larremore, “Systematic Inequality,” 1–6.

positive response that may be denied to applications that pose different questions or use alternative normative frameworks. The same positive reception, and thereby promotion of egalitarian ideas, will occur at academic conferences, in the refereeing and editorial processes of academic journals and presses, and in the evaluation of applications for entry-level positions. In this institutional context it is unsurprising that Cohen studied philosophy at two renowned universities, left with the egalitarian values inculcated as a child intact, and went on to a successful career in academic philosophy.

The question that then arises is: Why aren't all philosophers egalitarians? Although egalitarianism is the dominant normative position within the discipline, a significant minority of philosophers report a commitment to communitarianism and libertarianism.⁸⁸ The answer is that incentives do not compel people to act a given way, but only make such action more likely. In the same context Nozick uses the analogy of the number of people who go to the beach on a sunny day; it can be predicted that more people will go to the beach on a sunny day compared to a rainy one, but it does not follow that everyone will go to the beach when the sun shines, nor can an accurate prediction be made as to whether any one individual will go.⁸⁹ Similarly, in the institutional setting of academic philosophy there are strong incentives to adopt egalitarian beliefs, but it does not follow that everyone will become an egalitarian, nor can we predict with any certainty the normative position of any one individual. Nevertheless, the institutional dynamics of academic philosophy produce and reproduce the dominance of egalitarian ideas.

VII. CONCLUSION

Hayek warns that a civilization could destroy itself by following “the most cherished beliefs” of its “most revered moral leaders, sometimes saintly figures whose unselfishness is beyond question.”⁹⁰ Hayek fears that the outcomes produced by a market economy, in which personal success or failure is often determined by chance or circumstance, so conflicts with people’s intuitive ethical sensibilities that moral teachers would advocate the destruction of the market, the only economic system capable of sustaining an advanced civilization. He warns that the only protection against this process is to subject “even our dearest dreams of a better world to ruthless rational dissection.”⁹¹

This essay has presented an explanation of why moral leaders in academic philosophy are likely to be egalitarians who eschew careful empirical

⁸⁸ According to “The 2020 PhilPapers Survey,” 27 percent of philosophers accept or lean toward communitarianism and 13 percent accept or lean toward libertarianism.

⁸⁹ Nozick, *Socratic Puzzles*, 283.

⁹⁰ Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Volume 2, 67.

⁹¹ Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, Volume 2.

analysis of their ideas. Whereas Hayek and Nozick explain the appeal of socialism to intellectuals in terms of their specific personality type, I have argued that egalitarianism dominates academic philosophy because of its institutional structure.

Philosophy often involves metaethical analysis detached from empirical considerations, which creates a “veil of insignificance” that incentivizes the adoption of intuitively appealing egalitarian beliefs. Academic philosophy is also characterized by the privilege of participants. The world looks different to those with and without privilege and, perhaps counterintuitively, the “veil of privilege” leads to a misperception of social reality that encourages the adoption of egalitarian beliefs. Privileged individuals have a strong incentive to distance themselves from their privilege by publicly extolling egalitarianism and they may have a hubristic confidence in the ability of themselves and others to bring about economic equality. The public and professional commitment to egalitarianism that follows incentivizes identity-protective motivated reasoning that insulates egalitarian beliefs from critical challenge.

Cohen argues that the egalitarianism of wealthy, high-status individuals like himself is a “paradox of conviction.”⁹² This essay has set out an explanation of the egalitarianism of the wealthy and privileged as logical, not paradoxical. The socialism of the rich does not reflect a genuine desire to make society more equal. Rather, it protects and comforts those who occupy a socioeconomic position of considerable good fortune and have no intention of relinquishing their wealth and status.

Cohen argues that normative philosophy is a matter of personal morality. He, like many others, drank deeply and shamelessly from the cup of wealth and privilege while espousing economic equality. The personal morality of such a position should be plain to see.

Public Policy, King's College London

⁹² Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian*, 7.