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Poverty and Blame*

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In contemporary Western societies, poverty is often framed as a choice, or as the outcome of poor choices, for which the individual may fairly be held accountable and blamed. People dependent on income support may be depicted as lazy, manipulative, weak or impulsive, and as taking advantage of honest taxpayers. Their every spending decision is considered ripe for scrutiny and criticism. Assumptions about poor choice-making and poor character, implicit and explicit, inform policies directed at people living in poverty, including mutual obligation requirements and forced control of expenditure via cashless debit cards. These measures are experienced as punitive and as undermining the agency and autonomy of the individual to whom they are applied.

How can philosophical work on blame, responsibility, and punishment help to analyze and evaluate the moral impacts of poverty and the policies and discourse surrounding it? And how might an understanding of the impact poverty has on the choice-making and capacities of those affected by it force us to re-evaluate those theories?

Keywords Poverty · Welfare · Blame · Choice · Responsibility

*In keeping with the purposes of the Gavin David Young Lecture, I situate my remarks squarely in the realm of public philosophy. In doing so I hope to demonstrate the role that philosophy can play in the analysis and critique of important public issues and in turn to show how a careful consideration of such issues can inform and shape our theorizing.

Thank you to the Department of Philosophy at the University of Adelaide for the invitation to deliver the Gavin David Young Lecture. It's an honour to follow in such distinguished footsteps. It's a particular honour to be the first woman to deliver a lecture in the series.

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Introduction

In modern neoliberal societies, the working-aged poor tend to bear a double burden of deprivation and insecurity while being blamed for their poverty and, if receiving income support, held to exacting standards in return for their inadequate income.

Much of the blame seems to centre on their presumed imprudence, laziness, and lack of self-control. A 2013 report from a combined churches taskforce in Britain cites a number of widespread views or myths about people living in poverty including the following:

> 'They' are lazy and just don't want to work … 'They' are addicted to drink and drugs … 'They' are not really poor – they just don't manage their money properly … 'They' are on the fiddle … 'They' have an easy life on benefits … 'They' caused the deficit… (The Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Methodist Church, *et al.* 2023: 3)

All of them implicate some lack of self-control as the cause of poverty and imply that if it were not for their moral failings, the person would not be living in poverty.

Apart from the brief flowering of the welfare state after the Second World War, where poverty was seen as a structural problem requiring government intervention, it has always been thus. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, after describing the miserable conditions of unemployed miners, George Orwell notes of the year 1928 when he returned from Burma:

> The middle classes were still talking about 'lazy idle loafers on the dole' and saying that 'these men could all find work if they wanted to'…. That was the attitude towards unemployment in those days: it was a disaster which happened to *you* as an individual and for which *you* were to blame. (Orwell 1937: 79)

Philosophical work on poverty has more often been done under the banner of political philosophy than of moral psychology, which is my focus here.[1] I want to examine the *experience* of being poor in developed societies with large disparities of wealth – such as we see in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States – and its impact on the moral standing, self-worth, and agency of people living in poverty.

[1] Recent work by Jennifer Morton (2017; 2024) includes a focus on the moral psychology of poverty. Elizabeth Anderson (2004) highlights a number of critical issues around conditional welfare, including the impact on individuals.

While there are multiple moral issues raised by our treatment of people receiving income support (including the below poverty level of payments) I will begin by focusing upon the so-called 'mutual obligation' requirements imposed on working-aged people in Australia as a condition of receiving payments to guide §1 of my discussion. Under conditional welfare regimes in place across the Anglosphere and Europe, recipients must comply with a network of rules governing their conduct; failures to comply can result in suspension or cancellation of payments. I focus on Australia as the system I am most familiar with. The system in place from 2015 to 2023 serves as a case study to draw out the moral issues common to such regimes. I hope that this part of my discussion will demonstrate that philosophical work on blame and punishment can provide some useful tools for analysing and critiquing the justifications that might plausibly be mounted for these policies.[2]

In §2 I examine the impacts of poverty and of the policies directed at the poor on the moral standing, options, choice making, and agential capacities of those living in poverty, with a focus on self-control. I suggest that this invites a reconsideration of philosophical accounts of self-control, and responsible agency. I argue that agential control relies as much on social resources and social standing, as it does on the individual capacities more commonly associated with self-control. Self-control is in many respects another form of social privilege.

Note on Methodology

Since people living in poverty, and particularly those receiving income support, are a highly stigmatised group who are rarely allowed a public voice, I have chosen wherever possible to centre their voices. This is not only a requirement of epistemic justice. We cannot understand the moral impacts of poverty and of the systems imposed on the poor without listening to those who experience them firsthand. Every personal account I quote is representative of the hundreds I have read.[3]

[2] My focus is on the punitive nature of these regimes and their moral effects on participants. Their effectiveness on the sole dimension of moving people off benefits and into work is mainly addressed in footnotes so as not to interrupt the central discussion.

[3] I suspect the convergence in these accounts would easily meet what social scientists doing qualitative research term 'data saturation' (Saunders, Sim, *et al.* 2018): '*Saturation* means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category. As he sees similar instances over and over again, the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated' (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 61). It is 'the point in coding when you find that no new codes occur in the data. There are mounting instances of the same codes, but no new ones' (Urquhart 2013: 194).

1 Mutual Obligation, Blame, and Punishment

1.1 Setting the scene: Poverty, Control, and Welfare

Let's begin with a summary of an implicit argument for conditional welfare payments and then move on to an overview of the Mutual Obligation regime.

If poverty is usually or often a result of individual moral failings such as laziness, selfishness, lack of self-control or imprudence, then most adults who are poor are to blame for their own poverty. Poverty is seen as the result of chosen behaviour. Any assistance the state provides to the poor is thus justifiably conditional on individuals reforming their behaviour. Low payments to incentivize getting work, or more work,[4] coupled with oversight and controls that provide for sanctions against laziness and imprudence, assists this moral project and assures other hardworking taxpayers that they are not subsidizing others to live in idleness.

The claim that poverty is an individual moral failing is widely and successfully promulgated, and those who live in poverty live with the moral stigma attached to its acceptance. In Australia at least this negative view of the character of welfare recipients has been further ramped up by suggestions, enthusiastically taken up by mass media, that many welfare recipients actively cheat the system. On January 22nd 2015 the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the then-new Social Services Minister, Scott Morrison, had 'issued a warning to would-be dole bludgers, Disability Support Pension rorters and terrorists who want to wage war while on government benefits' (Knott 2015). Morrison claimed, in a speech that signalled a shift in approach to welfare recipients, that while Australians

> generally are quite happy to have a system that helps people who are genuinely in need and deserve our support, ... they're not going to cop people who are going to rort that system. ... So there does need to be strong welfare cop on the beat. (Knott 2015)

[4] Around 21% of working aged people who receive JobSeeker payments in Australia do have jobs. Many cycle in and out of employment (Bradbury and Whiteford 2022). These jobs are usually poorly paid, casual, and insecure – and often with hours that make them unfriendly for those with childcare or other care responsibilities. Additionally, 43% of JobSeeker recipients have been assessed as having only a limited capacity to work due to illness or disability (Hutchens 2023). People with a limited capacity to work must still meet mutual obligations. In the US Elizabeth Anderson points out that 'More than four-fifths of AFDC recipients had prior work experience, on average more than five years. From 36-60% of recipients worked to supplement their welfare payments, usually at low-paying informal sector jobs' (Anderson 2004: 249).

Morrison's words neatly encapsulate a number of the myths about people on welfare identified above. In particular, he encourages the view that welfare fraud is a significant problem (despite verified social security fraud being at less than 1%) and so all recipients must be viewed as potential cheats, bludgers, and criminals in need of close monitoring and the threat of punishment to weed out the undeserving among them.[5]

When poverty is presented and understood as an *individual* problem, caused by individual moral failings (or sometimes, in the case of the deserving poor, individual bad luck), institutional and social responses to poverty need not be targeted at correcting the underlying social and structural causes of poverty, or at ameliorating their effects, but at the management and control of the individual who is poor.

Welfare systems that assume the poor character of and widespread cheating by recipients will be built on a lack of trust and will prioritise avoidance of fraud via extensive monitoring, tough sanctions, and aggressive debt recovery for alleged overpayments. As the Royal Commission into 'Robodebt' (the illegal raising of debts against Social Security recipients) heard (Holmes 2023), an executive minute proposing a fraud and non-compliance task force targeting welfare recipients said: 'This strategy will send an important message around the country that "you're next" and there is very little chance to avoid being caught and punished' (Burton 2022).

In Australia, the conditions imposed on recipients of income support are couched as 'Mutual Obligations'. The state provides an income and in return the recipient is required to undertake a variety of activities to demonstrate their fitness to receive it. These requirements are set out by Services Australia as follows:[6]

> To keep getting your payment, you need to do all of the following:
>
> - Agree to a job plan
> - Meet the requirements of your plan
> - Go to appointments with your employment services provider, if you have one.

5 Duffy and Wolff (2022) report a very similar situation in the UK. They note: 'The idea that the country is full of benefit cheats has arguably permeated public consciousness with government minister Iain Duncan Smith reported as saying "it makes his blood boil" .... Such a strongly negative view is encouraged by the government' (2022: 103).

6 These were the requirements as at November 2022, when the Lecture was given. Access now shows a slightly softened approach (Services Australia 2023a), with the emphasis on penalties removed (though penalties are still a central part of the system). As I suggest later, changes to requirements may loosen or tighten according to political whims and their arbitrariness contributes to the moral insecurity of recipients.

> You may also need to complete and report your job searches.
> If you're required to look for work, you need to do all of the following:
>
> - go to all job interviews
> - accept any offer of suitable paid work
> - not leave a job, training course or program without a valid reason.
>
> If you don't meet your requirements, demerits and financial penalties may apply.

In addition, the recipient must meet further strict reporting requirements including of income, changes of relationships or address, rental receipts, and medical certificates.

Many of the activities the Mutual Obligation regime requires of people to keep their payments are regarded by them as pointless, time wasting and demeaning (Henriques-Gomes 2022a; b; Kelly 2023). They may also be expensive for the recipient, requiring them to spend money on transport to attend appointments or courses or to engage in compulsory work for the dole activities.[7]

Failure to meet any of the reporting or activity requirements without a valid excuse can result in the person being breached and given demerit points or financial penalties, including suspension or cancellation of their payment. There are around 200,000 payment suspensions per month, the majority issued for missed appointments or failure to apply for enough jobs (Australian Council of Social Service 2022). The threat of sanctions is a cause of considerable anxiety to those in the system:[8]

> It is a special kind of shame when you realise how powerless you are in a room where the other person can remove your only source of money .... The system we are forced into is ... a system of relentless bowing and humiliation – being forced into pointless busywork like unrecognised courses to feed this government's insatiable need to make the unemployed 'do something'. ... Refuse these humiliating tasks and your payment is suspended.... The negotiations are as fair as having a gun to your head and agreeing to hand over your wallet. (Naujokas 2019)

7 It has been pointed out that work for the dole, in particular, imposes additional costs. Physical work makes people hungrier, but they have no money for the additional food. The requirements also impose opportunity costs, since they take time away from potentially more productive activities.

8 Again, not much has changed since Orwell's time: 'He could not ... demand his pension ... he had to go to the colliery once a week at a time named by the company, and when he got there, he was kept waiting for hours in the cold wind. For all I know he was also expected to touch his cap and show gratitude to whomever paid him.; At any rate he had to waste an afternoon and spend sixpence in fares' (Orwell 1937: 43–44).

According to Services Australia, when you are 'in the penalty zone' you will:[9]

- lose half of your fortnightly payment for the first penalty
- lose all of your fortnightly payment for the second penalty
- have your payment cancelled for at least 4 weeks for a third penalty. (Services Australia 2023b)

What counts as a valid excuse for a breach of obligations? A woman whose payments were suspended because she spent the night in hospital with her daughter who has a life-threatening illness and rang to cancel an appointment with her job agency was told 'If your daughter is not on disability and you are not recorded as her primary carer then you must attend all appointments. Just because she was in hospital does not mean you can miss an appointment. You have not met your Mutual Obligation' (Anonymous 2023).

While some defenders of mutual obligation argue that penalties are not intended as punishment and are simply there to 'encourage re-engagement' and assist people into work, those subject to the regime regularly describe it as deliberately punitive.

In §1.2 I will draw upon philosophical work on punishment to ask whether the system is *fairly* characterized as punitive and if so whether the punishments can be justified. I will then consider a range of arguments that might be thought capable of supporting the principle of mutual obligation.

1.2 Punishment and justification

Punishment involves the imposition of treatment, which is intentionally unwelcome, burdensome, or harsh in response to action or actions undertaken by the target, for which the target is thought to be blameworthy. Antony Duff argues that 'an essential part of [punishment's] meaning and justification lies in its relation to moral blame' (Duff 1986: 41). Joel Feinberg notes that

> Punishment is a conventional device for the expression of attitudes of resentment and indignation, and of judgments of disapproval and reprobation, on either the part of the punishing authority himself or of those in

[9] A recent parliamentary report (Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services 2023) acknowledges many of the shortcomings of the system I describe and its ill effects on recipients and has recommended a number of changes to the employment system including better targeted supports, a reduced reliance on penalties, and a removal of the more pointless compliance activities. These recommendations have yet to be put into effect.

> whose name the punishment is inflicted. Punishment … has a symbolic significance. (Feinberg 1970: 98)

Strawson argues 'the readiness to acquiesce in the infliction of suffering on the offender *which is an essential part of punishment*' (Strawson 1974: 23, my emphasis)) flows from the moral reactive attitudes of indignation and resentment that we experience when moral demands are disregarded.

At the broad level, theories of the *purposes* and principled *justifications* of punishment have divided roughly into the retributivist and the utilitarian. First, retributivism offers distinctively desert-based, and so backward-looking, justifications of punishment focused on the agent and the wrongful act or acts for which they are considered blameworthy. On any retributivist account, punishment must be fair, proportionate to the offence, and deserved. Harsh treatment is seen as restoring the balance of rights disturbed by the offence and offering redress for the wrong committed. In communicative versions of the theory, punishment is a critical vehicle for the expression and communication of the community's justified moral condemnation of the offence and the offender.

Second, there are functions of punishment that are primarily utilitarian and forward-looking. These are concerned with both individual and general deterrence and with protection of the community. More recently Ellis (2003) argues that the deterrence and community protection functions of punishment gain their legitimacy, not from utilitarian considerations of welfare, but from the fundamental moral right of self-defence of one's significant interests. Punishment achieves this through the deterrence provided by the credible threat of punishment.

Third, a concern with *reform* of behaviour has elements of both the utilitarian and retributive approach. Punishment is supposed to achieve reform by deterrence or by bringing the offender to a sense of their own wrongdoing.

While much discussion of punishment, its aims and justification, has focused upon the criminal justice system it should be apparent that formal and informal systems of punishment are widespread in society. There are punitive sanctions for rule-breaking and other forms of misbehaviour in schools, workplaces, clubs, and sport. These sanctions may include warnings, reprimands, fines, and demotions with the most severe and final punishment as exclusion. While all punishment stands in need of moral justification, this burden is particularly acute where the system of punishment is administered by or on behalf of the state, given the vast imbalance of power between the state and individual citizens. This inequality of power means that the

coercive powers of the state must be strictly governed, transparent, procedurally fair, and with protections against abuse.

I contend that the sanctions imposed on welfare recipients by the mutual obligation regime satisfy the criteria of being intentionally unwelcome, burdensome, or harsh in response to action or actions undertaken by the target, *for which the target is thought to be blameworthy*. They involve the intentional infliction of suffering or deprivation. They give expression to moral attitudes of resentment and indignation towards people who are widely represented as lazy, ill motivated, and as gaming or trying to game the welfare system.

Given this, the practice acquires a heavy justificatory burden. What then are the justifications that might be advanced for the delivery of punishment within the welfare system?

First, there might be relevant consequentialist considerations that mirror those offered with respect to criminal justice. Those most often advanced are:

1. *Protection* of taxpayers by targeting and compliance mechanisms.
2. The threat of penalties acts as a *deterrence* against cheating and motivates active engagement with job programs and work-seeking.
3. *Promotes* moral qualities: personal responsibility, self-control, and life-management skills.

Unfortunately, there is no reliable or systematic evidence that the expensive, for-profit, surveillance and sanctions system has these positive effects, either on protection of taxpayer funds or on the long-term employment prospects or moral character of the targeted populations. A recent study in the Netherlands found *no* difference in employment outcomes between groups provided with unconditional and conditional welfare after 12 months – suggesting that deployment of expensive oversight and compliance mechanisms offers no *protection* of taxpayer funds.[10] An ongoing

[10] In their discussion of the cost effectiveness of what they call 'activation programs' Molander and Torsvik (2015) note that 'when assessing the "efficiency" of the programs, no one has included the administrative costs of running mandatory activation programs or the personal costs the programs impose on the participants' (Molander and Torsvik 2015: 378). In Australia these are likely to outweigh by a large amount any savings in benefits paid. Between 2015 and 2020 the Federal government paid close to $3 billion just to the 5 largest private agencies (there were more than 40 such agencies) to assist Jobseekers to find work – largely via compulsory activities. Since it was more profitable for these agencies to focus on easy to place participants who could be expected to – and usually did – find the work for themselves (Loosemore 2021), it is very unlikely that there was anything close to a commensurate saving on benefits paid. These costs might be justified as an example of costly punishment in order to promote social cooperation, but (i) that would concede that the system does

Universal Basic Income study has found positive effects on engagement and economic activity of the provision of unconditional income security, calling into question the necessity for penalties as *deterrents* against laziness or as motivation.[11] The recent Workforce Australia enquiry found that the current system was not effective in assisting the most disadvantaged recipients and not needed for better off recipients.[12] And I will argue in §2 that while the *moral* effects of punitive welfare are indeed significant, it does not promote rehabilitation or moral improvement, rather it inflicts moral injury on the participants.

If these forward-looking consequentialist justifications fail, then we are left with backward-looking or desert-based justifications for punishing income support recipients. The main *retributivist* justifications on offer are two:

by design administer punishment, and (ii) it would require evidence of improved cooperation or improved social licence for payments. Arguably the opposite was the case. During this period there was increasing stigmatization of, and resentment toward, income support recipients.

11 The Netherlands study did find improvements in social trust and mental health in a group given unconditional welfare (Betkó, Spierings, *et al.* 2022; Betkó 2023; Scholten, Betkó, *et al.* 2023). Like Australia and the UK, the Netherlands imposes strict conditions on the receipt of income support with a strong focus on moving people into employment. Indeed, in some respects their treatment of additional income is more stringent than Australia. Even the sale of the person's own personal possessions is treated as income for the purpose of assigning benefits, and people may incur a debt if their families are found to have purchased groceries for them (Betkó, *p.c.*). Note that this was a time limited experiment, with results taken 12 months into a two-year period, so the improvements in trust and mental health may not yet have translated into increased economic participation. The point here is that monitoring and the threat of penalties did not improve employment outcomes.

Preliminary results (two years in) from a large ongoing study of Universal Basic Income (UBI) in Kenya with 3 arms (two years UBI, twelve years UBI, or single up front lump sum) are more optimistic, indicating that unconditional income support did not promote idleness or increased drinking, but rather increased entrepreneurship, occupational choice, household income, health and wellbeing (Banerjee, Faye, *et al.* 2023). In this study the 12-year group and the large upfront payment group showed greater improvement than the 2-year group.

Some mandatory programs might work to get people off benefits in the short term. Molander and Torsvik (2015) cite a mandatory activation program in Denmark that offered training and counselling with the threat of loss of benefits if not undertaken (what they call a 'throffer') which showed a 30% higher job finding rate than in the control group. They note however, that it is 'far from obvious that the long-term impact is equally positive, as people may tend to rush into bad jobs when they are threatened with benefit sanctions' (2015: 378). Forcing people into poorly paid insecure jobs may just result in them cycling in and out of employment while forcing them to forgo opportunities to improve their long-term situations through education and skills training (see §3). They further note that systems based on throffers 'cannot be justified in efficiency terms alone' (Molander and Torsvik 2015: 379); they must also meet a requirement of fairness. My concern here is with the moral effects of threat-based, punitive systems on those who must interact with them – especially when the terms of the offer are unfair, unhelpful, or demeaning.

12 In other words, it is largely a waste of money. See Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services (2023).

1. The person's actions violate a *fair* principle of mutual obligation and so *merit* punishment and moral condemnation.
2. Sanctions for breaches of mutual obligations allow for *repayment* of the person's moral debt to the community. The imposition of sanctions restores fairness.

Importantly however, retributivism also places significant moral constraints on punishment. Punishment must, at a minimum, be *deserved*, it must be determined by procedures which are *fair*, and it must be *proportional* to the offence. Are these constraints satisfied by the mutual obligation regime? I will address the procedural and proportionality requirements first and then consider whether and under what conditions a welfare system governed by a principle of mutual obligation could be fair.

First, how is punishment determined and by whom? Since most jobseekers are assigned to a private employment service or job agency it is the agency through its case managers, that sets and monitors the person's individual job plan, which will include the number of jobs they must apply for and the appointments and courses they must attend. It is the case manager who monitors the individual's compliance with the plan and reports breaches to Centrelink. Agencies and case managers may vary in zealousness and flexibility with respect to compliance and reasons given for certain forms of non-compliance, such as missing appointments. Recipients have been threatened, by their case managers, with breaches and penalties for a wide range of offences, including failure to attend in person appointments that they had requested be done by phone, not rewriting a CV to the case manager's satisfaction, not answering a phone call from the agency while at work, not attending an activity because it conflicted with a work shift, not agreeing to an unsuitable job plan.[13] There are no minimum qualifications or training requirements for case managers. There is no formal, transparent process following principles of natural justice before punishment is applied. Reviews/appeals are administrative rather than substantive in nature. These processes arguably do not meet a fairness requirement.

It might be argued that instituting due process before inflicting punishment would be an unreasonable administrative burden in such a large and complex system with hundreds of thousands of individual recipients. Consistency is achieved

[13] Australian Unemployed Workers Union (2023); further examples may be found at their website, https://www.auwu.org.au/. See also submissions to Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services (2023).

by employees applying clear rules and algorithms, not by exercising judgment. And for this they do not need specialized training. But if delivering due process would be too burdensome and costly perhaps the answer is to reform or replace the system of sanctions rather than to accept its casualties.

For there are indeed casualties. Consider what a loss or steep reduction of income means for a person who is already poor and marginalised. They cannot buy food, they cannot pay rent or utility bills, they cannot put petrol in their car or take public transport. They cannot buy prescribed medication or see a doctor. And note that, during the period of suspension or cancellation of payments they are still expected to meet the requirements of their job plan and apply for work, attend appointments and so forth. Is the knowing and intentional infliction of hunger, malnutrition, untreated illness, loss of housing and effective exclusion from even minimal social participation, a reasonable and proportionate response to offences such as failing to submit forms on time, missing appointments, or not applying for enough jobs? Since many of those punished have dependent children, we must also ask whether it is fair to inflict these deprivations on children, for whom the effects will be lifelong? These, I hope, are rhetorical questions. The system clearly fails the proportionality requirement. It fails the fair process requirement. I will now consider whether and under what conditions the punishment of welfare recipients might meet a desert requirement.

1.3 Justifications for mutual obligations

We have already seen that the implicit justification for punishment of welfare recipients, rests on a principle of mutual obligation. The questions I address here are directed at this principle. Is the principle of mutual obligation, which generates these punishments, fair? Under what conditions would it be fair? Do those conditions obtain? I draw upon a very useful discussion by Buyx (2008) on possible grounds for justification of rationing the health care offered to those who are deemed to have contributed to their own condition. (See Kennett (forthcoming) for a discussion of Buyx's claims in which I argue that denial of health care on grounds of desert is punitive and unjustified.) Each of the justifications I examine has echoes in the discourse around mutual obligations and conditional welfare.

1.3.1 Communitarian justifications

Communitarianism holds that as social beings we live our lives in communities which shape our identities. Since we have a 'vital interest in leading decent communal lives ... we have a strong obligation to support and nourish the particular communities that provide meaning for our lives' (Bell 2023: §2). Communitarians argue that the interests of the community must take precedence over those of the individual . As Buyx puts it:

> The primacy of ... the common good justifies that the state or community require individuals to contribute to this common good by showing responsible... behaviours. It also legitimises a public system that exerts pressure and withholds resources in cases where individuals do not comply. (Buyx 2008: 871)

In the context of welfare payments, the common good may be argued to require both the prudent and responsible distribution of public funds and the contribution of labour, by all who are able, to the economic life and wellbeing of the state. Unconditional welfare supposedly discourages economic participation by permitting people to choose idleness and is thus an irresponsible use of community resources. The mutual obligations regime thus recognises the moral primacy of community; activity requirements and corresponding sanctions are legitimate tools to ensure compliance and assure the broader community of the prudent use of public funds.

However, the picture of the common good that is invoked, explicitly or implicitly, in support of punitive welfare regimes is unduly narrow and selective and relies on contestable empirical and normative assumptions, among them that a significant proportion of recipients will prefer idleness to work. While it is often claimed in more sensationalist parts of the press that large numbers of unemployed people simply don't want to work this does not appear to be supported by publicly available data.[14]

[14] E.g., Knaus (2016); I refer the reader back to the poverty myths cited in the introduction.

Molander and Torsvik (2015) note that 'any argument in favor of mandatory activation [mutual obligation requirements] presumes that among the benefit recipients there are individuals who are either unwilling to participate in voluntary productivity enhancing programs or who are unwilling to search (hard enough) to find ordinary work. [Yet] mandatory activation programs may miss their targets in two different ways: (i) activate persons that are futile to activate because they cannot get ordinary work or (ii) activate persons who need not be forced to participate in the programs.... [So] the legitimacy of mandatory activation depends critically on the fraction of will-nots among the welfare recipients' (2015: 375). Their clause (i) refers to people who it is both futile and unfair to threaten and punish because they face high or insuperable barriers to employment, and (ii) to people who are

There is also an unspoken assumption that people on welfare contribute nothing of value (do no work) to their communities. Yet care responsibilities are one of the primary reasons for people being unavailable to take paid employment (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023).[15]

Moreover, given that on the dominant economic view governing neoliberal economies, (i) low inflation is a legitimate and important social goal, (ii) full employment can fuel inflation, and (iii) the control of inflation can require manipulating the unemployment rate (via interest rate rises), it may be argued that people thus tipped into involuntary unemployment and rendered reliant on welfare are already sacrificing for the common good and should not be asked to do more.[16]

When we broaden our conception of the common good, punitive welfare becomes increasingly difficult to justify on those grounds. A punitive system based on mistrust, combined with poverty rates of payments, has been found to work against social and economic participation and to increase rates of physical and mental illness, homelessness, crime, and other social ills – all of which harm communities as well as individuals and are arguably more expensive than unconditional welfare.

already motivated to find work so threats and punishment are superfluous and may even be counterproductive. The recent Workforce Australia enquiry in effect found that the current system misses its target in both ways.

15 Anderson (2004) notes, of the US context, that 'having a mother with health problems or a child with health, learning, or emotional problems are strong predictors of nonwork among welfare recipients. These two problems are common. One study found them among two-fifths of sampled welfare recipients.... Welfare recipients' unstable employment is primarily due to circumstances beyond their control and to dependant-care responsibilities' (2004: 250–51).

16 This claim has been questioned by a reader. I leave the question of whether control of inflation in fact *requires* tipping people into unemployment via interest rate rises to others, but note that interest rate rises are the tool that the Reserve Bank of Australia explicitly uses to manage inflation and that its own forecasts predict rises in unemployment when it does so. Its target unemployment rate is 4.5%. In June 2023, the now governor of the Reserve Bank, Michele Bullock 'warned the jobless rate *would have to climb to 4.5 per cent to tame inflation, implying about 140,000 people could lose their jobs* in the next 18 months. In some of the most explicit remarks to date from an RBA official, Ms Bullock said inflation would not return to the central bank's 2 per cent to 3 per cent target band without a sustained period of below-trend employment growth' (Read 2023, my emphasis). In December 2023 there were 782,480 current and suspended JobSeeker recipients (data.gov.au 2023) – however many had some form of work (perhaps only one hour per week) and so do not count as unemployed. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, to be classified as 'unemployed' a person needs to meet the following criteria (more or less): 'not employed ...; had actively looked for full-time or part-time work at any time in the [past] four weeks ... and were available for work' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Others have limited capacity to work or are currently unable to work due to illness or disability (see footnote 4). On my admittedly rough calculations based on population figures and ABS statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023), it would appear that for the RBA unemployment target to be met, over 600,000 adults who are available for work and not already working more than one hour per week, would need to be out of work.

1.3.2 Reciprocity/Solidarity

A related view favoured by Buyx rests on the moral principle of reciprocity. She argues that

> members of a liberal and solidarity society owe one another a reasonable degree of effort and care, which are essential to support and preserve the system and its institutions in the long run … [Hence] a *moderate* expectation that people contribute towards this system and behave responsibly within it is justified. (Buyx 2008: 873)

The terminology of 'mutual obligations' might suggest just such a reasonable requirement of reciprocity. Society meets its part of the deal by providing the unemployed person with an income. In return the recipient is expected to actively seek work or undertake study or training that will lead to employment. Further it could be argued that active social solidarity with the unemployed is expressed by supporting them in finding employment, including through the judicious use of activity requirements and corresponding sanctions. Arguments to this effect can be found throughout submissions to the Workforce Australia enquiry. Those supporting the retention of Mutual Obligations claim that under a voluntary system recipients would disengage to the detriment of their employability and capacity for social and economic participation.[17]

A moderate and flexible regime of mutual obligations in return for benefits might indeed be justifiable in a solidarity society and avoid violating the requirements of fairness and proportionality set out above. But it is doubtful that modern neoliberal societies meet the criteria for solidarity. Elizabeth Anderson argues that:

> a just society must assure to all citizens effective access to the social bases of equal standing as citizens. This view … requires that all citizens have effective access to the means they need … to fully participate as equals in the political, economic, and social life of the community. 'Effective access' means within reach by individuals exercising the capabilities they have or can realistically acquire. (Anderson 2004: 251)

Welfare payments in Australia and the UK are set so far below the poverty line that they do not allow recipients to secure the bare necessities of life, let alone permit

[17] See footnote 13.

effective and equal social participation.[18] The Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee set up by the Australian Government concluded that Jobseeker payments were seriously inadequate on all measures, and advised that

> unemployment payments have fallen to such an inadequate level that they create a barrier to paid work… our income support system should prevent poverty and financial distress to ensure people looking for paid work are not placed at a greater disadvantage by virtue of not having enough money to meet the essentials of life. (Interim Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee 2024: 44)

The low level of payments is thus a barrier to the successful completion of the very obligations that must be met to access the payment. Hunger, poor health, caring responsibilities, insecure housing, and the stigma of poverty all undermine a person's present capacity to reciprocate. The current system is also insensitive to the various forms which reciprocity can take and to the fact that people's ability to reciprocate fluctuates over time and so is best assessed over longer time periods than those that elapse between payments. Many recipients have long histories of paid employment and care work – in other words, that they have already contributed in 'effort and care' to their communities and are repaid by forced participation in a system many describe as abusive.

Our current welfare system would need to undergo considerable reform before it could generate a fair requirement of reciprocity or solidarity. Moreover, a genuinely reciprocal system of obligations would need to be co-designed and co-managed with recipients rather than paternalistically imposed upon them. Since we do not have such a system the reciprocity/solidarity argument does not apply here.

1.3.3 Luck egalitarianism

Finally, we can identify another view, Luck Egalitarianism, that is also implicitly invoked in discussions around welfare payments and mutual obligations. Luck egalitarianism holds that[19]

[18] For a detailed account of the UK system see Duffy and Wolff (2022). They note that the effect of below poverty payments and a system of sanctions is 'food poverty, energy poverty, social isolation and mental illness' (2022: 105).

[19] Buyx, along with many others, rejects the applicability of luck egalitarianism to rationing of healthcare. For an argument in favor of applying luck egalitarianism to dental care see Albertsen (2015).

> Inequalities warranting compensation are those resulting from factors that individuals have no choice about (so-called 'brute luck'). As for inequalities resulting from freely chosen behaviour, such as lifestyle choices or risky behaviour (so-called 'option luck'), these do not warrant compensation.... (Buyx 2008: 872)

This is expressed by Roemer in the language of responsibility:

> society should indemnify people against poor outcomes that are the consequences of causes that are beyond their control, but not against outcomes that are the consequences of causes that are within their control, and therefore for which they are personally responsible. (Roemer 1993: 147)

On this view, withholding income is *not* punitive because society has *no obligation* to compensate or indemnify people whose poverty arises from voluntary behaviour and poor choices. In brief, since there is no requirement of fairness to provide an income to such people, we may decline to do so without wronging them, and given that we do provide an income, we may impose conditions on the receipt of public charity.

A large public system cannot initially distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor, so it could be argued that the system of mutual obligations and strict oversight of recipients is a justifiable means by which we can weed out the undeserving. Indeed, this argument was explicitly invoked by former Social Security Minister Scott Morrison when he distinguished between people 'who are genuinely in need and deserve our support' from 'people who are going to rort that system' in introducing tougher oversight and control of recipients (Knott 2015).

While it is no doubt true that some people who live in poverty have made bad choices for which they are responsible, many have not. The trope of the young dole bludger who prefers surfing to working is far from representative. In 2020 a Parliamentary Budget Office report found 'the most likely person to be on JobSeeker before the advent of the coronavirus pandemic was a woman over the age of 45' (Wright 2020). In other words a growing number of people who require income support are older women with significant work histories and significant care responsibilities,[20] and who face both age and gender discrimination in the workplace. Older men are

[20] The 'undeserving' poor are supposed to have made choices that reflect a poor moral character. Yet many older women have made choices that were to their economic detriment – so in this sense bad – in order to meet caring responsibilities.

also badly affected by industry closures in times of economic change and find difficulty in regaining employment.

Treating all recipients as potential crooks and cheats is hardly fair to the overwhelming majority of honest recipients. However there is a more fundamental problem with any attempt to rely on a distinction between brute luck and option luck to underwrite the division of poor people into deserving and undeserving categories. Put simply, brute luck determines and shapes options in myriad ways and a just determination of the role of brute luck in each individual case is arguably unachievable.[21] In order to reach a better understanding of the ways in which poverty shapes people's options and their choices we must return to the stereotypes with which we began. It's time to look in more detail at the alleged moral defects shared by the undeserving poor.

2 Poverty, Blame, and Self-Control

2.1 Self-control and Diachronic Agency

Doing well as an adult relies (in part) on the development and maintenance of self-regulatory and self-management capacities. Adults must have the capacity to plan and to follow through on their plans and this requires, among other things, the capacity to delay gratification.

In psychology self-control is primarily characterised in terms of a conflict between 'smaller sooner' (SS) and 'larger later' (LL) rewards. The presence of SS rewards places the agent in a situation of conflict and requires the exercise of self-control to overcome the temptation and achieve LL rewards. Life success is popularly thought to track the capacity to eschew SS rewards for LL rewards.[22] In Walter Mischel's famous marshmallow experiments young children were offered the choice between one marshmallow now, or two marshmallows if they waited until the researcher returned to the room. Equally famously, the children who were able to generate and successfully employ various strategies of self-control to wait

[21] While it may be possible to design a conditional welfare system consistent with luck egalitarianism, i.e., that is sensitive to the ways in which poverty shapes options and punishes only those who truly deserve it, that is not what we have. Moreover, such a system would be very hard to administer justly. I address the complexities and fairness of judging responsibility for health conditions (as a basis for restricting care) in (Kennett forthcoming).

[22] As can be seen in the trope that young adults could afford to buy houses if only they didn't indulge themselves with avocado toast and the latest phones.

for the two marshmallows did better on a variety of measures later in life, including education, drug use and delinquency, and conscience (Shoda, Mischel, and Peake 1990; Eigsti, Zayas, *et al.* 2006).

We will return to the marshmallow experiments later (§2.3). For now, we should note that self-control has a normative dimension that is not fully captured by the rendering of it as a response to a competition between goods arriving at different times or even as a conflict between our desires and our all things considered judgments.[23] We certainly exercise self-control when we leave a cosy bed to go for a run because we value health or forgo a party to prepare for an important talk the next day or restrain an urge to punch someone who has angered us. However, beyond this, the kind of control which is most valuable is control over the shape and direction of our life as a whole, what Bratman terms 'planning agency' (e.g., Bratman 2022). This executive form of control, which harmonizes, prioritizes, and trades off our various goals and values and responsibilities, broadly involves the selection of ends that we deem both desirable and achievable, and governs the particular actions, or sequences of actions, that we might choose in the pursuit of our ends. There is thus an important distinction between *synchronic* self-control which is exercised in situations of temptation or conflict, and *diachronic* forms of control that are exercised in advance of or in the absence of temptation and so need not involve a direct psychological conflict between desire and values. Synchronic self-control requires willpower or the ability to rapidly deploy techniques of distraction or removal. Diachronic self-control involves setting priorities, making commitments, planning, and in general organizing our lives in such a way that we mostly avoid the kinds of temptations that might derail us. So I might arrange for the automatic transfer of funds from my pay into a separate account for holidays or a house deposit. Knowing my tendency to backslide on solo exercise plans I join a basketball team with friends.

Both forms of control are important for human agents, but the exercise of self-control diachronically, and the strategies that secure it, helps to constitute us as diachronic agents and as the particular agents that we are. Without the capacity to exercise control via planning and strategies we could not access and secure some of the most important human goods – those that require sustained attention over time such as friendships, careers, making a home, and creative endeavours – or shape our lives in accordance with our values. These goods confer meaning, structure, and

[23] The following account of self-control is a summary of my previous work where it was developed: see especially Kennett (2001; 2013) and Kennett and Wolfendale (2019).

social recognition on the agents who possess them and contribute to mental health and well-being. They also make available and intertwine with a variety of synchronic goods. My income from my rewarding, though demanding, career and the relationships I've developed with my colleagues, support sharing a nice meal or a fun trivia night at the pub. And the possession of the diachronic goods scaffolds and supports further exercises of both synchronic and diachronic self-control. How?

One's diachronic plans, projects, and commitments provide a structure that removes the need for constant decision-making and choice. They regulate our day-to-day choices and help determine what will be counted as a reason in situations of conflict. Important decisions are already made and do not need to be revisited unless circumstances change. Diachronic goods such as loving relationships, absorbing work and interesting hobbies also work to protect against passing temptations and provide motivational resources for the exercise of self-control. The person with a rich array of interests, relationships, and commitments sees the cost of yielding to temptations which threaten to derail those goods. The person who lacks those goods is not so protected. The acquisition and exercise of diachronic self-control – control over the shape and direction of one's life – thus depends to a significant extent upon a degree of social privilege and a sense of trust and security that is not available to those living under conditions of scarcity, hostility, and stigma.

My contention is that poverty removes important social resources that support the exercise of synchronic and diachronic self-control.[24] However, the stigma and myths surrounding poverty also work to render many exercises of self-control by people living in poverty invisible to others or to mischaracterise them as *failures* of self-control.

Let's explore these ideas.

2.2 Self-control and hopelessness

> You can't settle to anything, you can't command the spirit of hope … with that evil dull cloud … hanging over you. (Orwell 1937)

[24] I refer the reader to a recent piece by Jennifer Morton which makes a compatible argument. In 'Inequality in Planning Capacity' (2024), Morton argues that people living in poverty not only have unequal access to resources, such as money, they are also discriminated against by social and institutional practices that directly affect their capacity to plan – such as lack of job and housing security. These forms of insecurity require regulatory change. The effects, for example, of a deregulated labor market on individuals trying to plan and manage their lives are clearly seen in many of the submissions to government enquiries I've referred to above.

I have argued elsewhere (Kennett 2013) that diachronic self-control is motivationally dependent upon two critical assumptions:

Possibility condition We must believe we have the power to act upon the world so as to bring it about that the holiday, the writing retreat, the fitness plan, or the house purchase happens at least roughly according to plan.

Identity condition We must feel that the envisioned future is *ours*.

Both conditions are subject to social contingency. Both may be subject to brute luck. The possibility condition, in particular, relies on an assumption that the social environment is relatively benign. It relies on what Jessica Wolfendale (2017; see also Kennett and Wolfendale 2019) has dubbed *moral security*. Moral security engenders a sense of competence and confidence in our own agency – it supports what Abraham Maslow called feelings of 'being at home in the world', 'emotional stability', 'self-esteem', 'self-acceptance', and 'courage' (1942: 334–35). This sense of security provides a basis for planning and so supports active agency and active control of our lives.

We possess moral security when have confidence that our interests and welfare are regarded as morally important, and that our moral standing is protected by the social, political, and legal institutions in our society. Moral security requires three forms of social and legal recognition: recognition of our basic physical needs and welfare, recognition of our status as moral agents with our own values and conception of the good, and recognition of our epistemic standing or epistemic authority of our testimony regarding our needs, experiences, and welfare.

Where these forms of recognition are systematically denied – as they are in punitive and paternalistic welfare systems – we are morally injured. We are injured in our capacity *as agents*.[25] These injuries are compounded for welfare recipients by the stigmatizing myths about poverty used to justify the system. Where people are held to be blameworthy for their own poverty they are often seen as lacking any entitlement to the goods we hold central to a decent fulfilling life. Poor people have no entitlement to recreation, play, meaningful work, parenthood, or indeed to *anything* nice. Their every purchase, possession, and action is thought ripe for scrutiny and criticism. If you doubt this, do a quick survey of social media where welfare recipients are constantly called upon to justify, for example, having a smartphone or computer,

[25] For a fuller explication and defence of the notion of moral injury, as I am using it here, see Talbert and Wolfendale (2023). Blacksher (2002) discusses a case study of the impacts of poverty on agency.

spending money on a hobby, being on social media at all, or, heaven forbid, buying food that does not meet their critic's standards of thrift and nutrition.[26]

Such grim and hostile environments undermine efforts to exercise control over one's actions and one's life. In her mental visits to the future, the agent must see the future she would value having as one which is open to her. She must be able to project herself into that future, not as a mere fantasy or wish, but as a live option. Where that assumption does not hold, where a person cannot trust that they can bring about the outcomes they desire by their own or joint actions, they may lose hope and motivation. As Cheshire Calhoun says, 'when exercising one's agency has ceased to be reliably connected to producing intended effects, deliberation may well seem pointless and the future hopeless' (2008: 205).

Punitive welfare systems characterised by arbitrary demands combine with poverty and stigma to undermine the recipient's sense of agency and deny access to the diachronic goods that motivate and resource self-control. This produces a sense of pointlessness and hopelessness. As one respondent to the Workforce Australia enquiry put it:

> I would ask you to consider and recognise that those of us who are reliant on this *are deprived of any means to control our circumstances*. A system failure, a missed phone call, a misunderstanding or a simple lack of communication can lead to suspension of payments.
> The stress associated with being constantly under threat by the whims of a particular person, system faults or even a missed phone call are immeasurable. That I might be unable to go to the doctor, pay for medication, buy petrol, pay bills on time (so as not to incur further costs, pay for internet/phone (which is now a requirement to meet with Centrelink & Workforce obligations) is considerable and has a massive impact on those of us who are living under unfortunate circumstances. *It effects our physical and emotional health, our ability to participate in our communities, our sense of future and diminishes our self-worth and our accom-*

[26] A recent UK MyGov survey (Smith 2023) found:

- 49% of respondents don't think that people on government benefits should be able to afford rent.
- 45% don't want them to have a TV, 55% don't think they should be able to afford a basic smart phone (essential for recipients in Australia), or a non-active hobby.
- 73% think they shouldn't be able to afford to go out to socialize.
- 72% opposed to a monthly takeaway meal.
- 49% don't want them buying art supplies for their kids.

> *plishments – reducing them to meaninglessness while keeping us in poverty*. (Anonymous 2023, my emphases)

The effects of the system as described here are not merely unpleasant or disliked. All of us have to do things we would on the whole rather not do and we will all, in our lives, have to endure irritations, illnesses, pain, and loss, that we would rather avoid. But a system which has design features that undermine self-worth and hope, damage physical and mental health, and which excludes people from social participation, inflicts *moral* injuries – injuries to us as moral agents.

What do agents do under these circumstances of deprivation, stigma, and authoritarian oversight? Where diachronic goods are out of reach it becomes *rational* to refocus on those goods that are available.[27]

2.3 Synchronic goods and the privilege of self-control

> When you are underfed, harassed, bored and miserable you don't want to eat dull wholesome food ... there is always something cheaply pleasant to tempt you.... **That is how the mind works**. (Orwell 1937)

The original marshmallow experiments which purported to show the lifelong benefits of the capacity to delay gratification had significant limitations. They used a small, relatively homogenous sample of children and did not control for class, income, or parental education levels. Later studies of larger more heterogenous groups have suggested that the ability to delay gratification is significantly shaped by social and economic background – and it is this background that explains long term success.

> among kids whose mothers did not have college degrees, those who waited did no better than those who gave in to temptation, *once other factors like household income and the child's home environment at age 3... were taken into account*. For those kids, self-control alone couldn't overcome economic and social disadvantages. [Conversely,] among

27 See Morton (2017) for a detailed argument to a similar conclusion to mine that draws upon cognitive science research to explain how scarcity affects the deliberation of those living in poverty. (See also Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) for a broader discussion of the impacts of scarcity on deliberation.) I agree that poverty may have lasting impacts on deliberative/cognitive styles that may in the end be counterproductive for the agent. I think Tirado (2013) illustrates that to some extent. But it is not my main focus here.

> kids whose mothers had a college degree, those who waited for a second marshmallow did *no better in the long run*—in terms of standardized test scores and mothers' reports of their children's behavior—than those who dug right in. (McCrory Calarco 2018, my emphasis)

Other studies have also found that trust in the experimenter was an important factor in motivating children to wait (Daukas 2006). In other words, children were more likely to wait if they believed that the second marshmallow would be delivered as promised. These later studies suggest that either we are wrong about the benefits of self-control to successful agency, or we have failed to notice the extent to which diachronic self-control relies upon social resources and social privilege. We have treated self-control as an individual achievement, just as we have treated poverty as an individual failure, and we are mistaken on both counts.

Where self-control does not offer a pathway to the diachronic goods it is no failure of self-control to grab the short-term goods that *are* available. As Orwell said, 'that is how the mind works'. Poor parents cannot afford school camps, they cannot afford holidays or ballet lessons, visits to the circus, or the cost of team sports for their children. But on the days where they do have money – before it all evaporates on rent and bills – they will often seek to indulge their children with small treats, such as sweets, fast food, or cheap trinkets, in part to make up for all that they cannot provide. As McCrory Calarco observes, 'for poor children, indulging in a small bit of joy today can make life feel more bearable, especially when there's no guarantee of more joy tomorrow (2018).

This reality is often lost on those who monitor and judge the poor. If only 'they' could delay gratification and exercise self-denial, the narrative goes, they would be able to 'get ahead', pay their bills, buy a house, and so forth – when the truth is that for most poor people no amount of self-denial will deliver the promised rewards. As Linda Tirado puts it:

> I will never not be poor, so what does it matter if I don't pay a thing and a half this week instead of just one thing? It's not like the sacrifice will result in improved circumstances; the thing holding me back isn't that I blow five bucks at Wendy's. (Tirado 2013)

People living in poverty are struggling to cope with challenges that more privileged individuals can often avoid, and with vastly reduced resources. So, for example, while both well-off and poor people use treats and rewards strategically to support

self-control and to further their goals, or simply to get through a tough day, the use of strategic rewards is judged very differently in the poor.

When we praise a middle-class person's success in sticking to their commitments and achieving their diachronic goals, we often do not notice just how important a role social and economic privilege has played in resourcing and supporting their self-management strategies. Well-off people may often forgo *some* SS rewards for the sake of LL rewards, but they rarely forgo SS rewards completely. Perhaps I decide that I must miss trivia night at the pub with friends because I need to prepare a lecture or complete my essay marking. But what often happens in such cases is that I substitute in other SS rewards that are compatible with my LL goals. I might stock up on chocolates and good coffee and reward myself with a nice glass of wine or a fine scotch at the end of the evening. This is hardly Olympic level self-denial. I also have a high baseline of comfort. My house is well heated, the furniture is good, I am well-fed. My work is interesting, albeit demanding. The children of middle-class parents may not be indulged with sweet treats, they may have to wait until their birthday for the latest video game, but there are plenty of other goods available in their immediate environments. They go to sushi train and indoor play centres, swimming lessons and drama camp. Their parents have brunch with their cycling buddies at the end of a hard training ride. The rewards and incentives that we middle class people arrange for ourselves in the pursuit of larger goals either pass unremarked or are seen as well-deserved and appropriate self-care.

By contrast the efforts of the person living in poverty, without that baseline of comfort and security, to strategically manage their lives and commitments through the use of SS rewards attracts very different commentary. It is often interpreted as evidence of poor judgement, weakness of will, or shameful self-indulgence. Food shaming is particularly common. Woe betide any poor person who shares on social media a picture of the food items bought from their limited budget if it includes chocolate, sweets, coffee, or tea. A poor person who eats a donut when they could have chosen an apple is deemed unworthy of public support. Poor people are expected to get through their day without any of the indulgences the rest of us rely on. On the self-control front they are expected to do more with far less resources. But like us they use rewards strategically.

> I smoke. It's expensive. It's also the best option. You see, I am always, always exhausted. It's a stimulant. When I am too tired to walk one more step, I can smoke and go for another hour. When I am enraged

> and beaten down and incapable of accomplishing one more thing, I can smoke and I feel a little better, just for a minute. It is the only relaxation I am allowed. It is not a good decision, *but it is the only one that I have access to*. (Tirado 2013, my emphasis)

Tirado's horizons and options are limited by her poverty. Self-control is directed at getting through her difficult, bleak, demanding days, not at achieving a step towards larger goods such as a house, fitness, career, or creative endeavour. She says, 'I will never have large pleasures to hold on to'. In directing her efforts accordingly, her exercises of self-control and self-management go unrecognised or are mischaracterised as *failures* of self-control. The stigmatization of her options for self-management – smoking and fast food – are another aspect of the lack of moral security and respect afforded to people living in poverty and an illustration of social denial of their epistemic authority over the meaning and normative significance of their lives and choices.

3 Conclusion

A prior condition for a solidarity society and the justness of an income support system based around mutual obligations is moral security. To remind you, this requires

> social, political, and legal moral recognition along a number of dimensions: recognition of our basic needs, recognition of our moral standing (or dignity), and recognition of our testimonial or epistemic authority. (Wolfendale 2017: 248)

The stigmatization of poverty – the representation of it as an individual moral failing – undermines the agency and moral security of people living in poverty. Where poverty is or can be stigmatized, and people blamed for their poverty, there is ongoing political temptation to do so, to tighten conditions for receipt of income support, and to subject recipients to onerous demands, intrusive surveillance, and penalties for non-compliance. These penalties, I have argued, constitute punishment while failing to meet the basic moral constraints on just punishment of (at least) fairness and proportionality. I have also argued they fail to satisfy a desert requirement, since, while the violation of a *fair* system of mutual obligation could meet a desert requirement for justified punishment, the systems in place are neither fair nor mutual.

As with other stigmatized groups, the entitlement of the poor or unemployed to the conditions of a decent life depends on the largesse or toleration of the powerful

– a largesse that may be withdrawn at any time. Philip Pettit argues that a person or group enjoys freedom to the extent that no other person or group has 'the capacity to interfere in their affairs on an arbitrary basis' (1999: 165). Welfare recipients conspicuously lack this form of freedom or security.

People on income support in Australia experienced the arbitrariness of their entitlement to a decent life firsthand during the pandemic, when they were given proof that poverty is a policy choice. Supplementary pandemic payments raised their income to the poverty line. Mutual obligations were suspended. Studies and first-person reports of the effects of this increase show all round improvements (Australian Council of Social Service 2020; Fisher 2021). People could afford fresh food, they could schedule repairs to their car, a long overdue visit to the dentist, a replacement for their clapped-out fridge, or birthday presents for their children. Their health improved. There was a lifting of the cloud of hopelessness, in Orwell's expression. They made plans for study, for work, for creativity, for social participation. And then it was all over. They discovered once again that governments would rather spend billions on companies that monitor the poor for profit than use that money to raise their income. They discovered that, for example, studying for a humanities degree does not count towards meeting mutual obligations, whereas a short barista course or a certificate that may be your ticket to low paid insecure casual work does – as would a meaningless and demeaning in house session on improving your motivation (Australian Government Department of Social Services 2024: §3.11.3.10).[28] Once again, their time, their commitments, their aspirations, their point of view were not valued, respected, or even considered; their epistemic authority regarding their needs, capacities, interests, talents, and values was denied. Once again, they had to decline invitations from friends because they could not afford a cheap meal or even a coffee. Once again, poverty led to social isolation, rental stress, hunger, and increased physical and mental ill-health.

Under conditions of social and moral insecurity people living in poverty find that even if they try to improve their situation, the onerous conditions placed on their receipt of an income or on their access to relevant opportunities often deprive them of those possibilities. Melissa Fisher failed a numeracy test that she needed to pass in order to access a student loan to pay for a graphic design course that was well suited to her talents and capacities, having already been accepted into the course. She says:

[28] Advocacy and support for other poor or disabled people also doesn't count towards mutual obligations.

> It wasn't a surprise to me that I failed numeracy. Budgeting I can use maths down to my last 20c I've been budgeting since I was 12 and took over the fortnightly grocery shop and paying the bills. I missed so much school first through domestic violence and then when my dad left through becoming a carer. … I'm wondering today how many other people failed … then couldn't afford to study as a result? How many rich people failed but it doesn't matter because they can afford to pay? *Money gives people more opportunity to better themselves it gives them the second chance those of us in poverty don't get.* (Fisher 2024, my emphasis)[29]

Facing such barriers, individuals living in poverty may well give up on deliberating and planning for a future they are assured can be theirs, but experience has taught them they cannot believe in.

> We have learned not to try too hard to be middle class. It never works out well and always makes you feel worse for having tried and failed yet again. Better not to try. … We don't plan long term because if we do we'll just get our hearts broken. It's best not to hope. You just take what you can get as you spot it. (Tirado 2013)

To sum up: People living in poverty do not as a class lack the capacities for planning and self-control in comparison to more privileged individuals. They are not lazy or lacking an understanding of what is valuable. Rather they lack moral and social security; their agency is externally undermined through stigmatizing social and political narratives, social and legal structures, and punitive practices, that deny them important elements of moral recognition and entrench them in poverty. Their poverty deprives them of the range of resources that are available to more privileged people in developing and adopting strategies of self-management and self-control to achieve their longer-term goals. They are then subject to blame for their supposed moral deficiencies which are used to further justify punitive and intrusive oversight of their spending and activities.

In the field of moral psychology, an examination of the lived reality of poverty should also make us question dominant theories of self-control which see self-control as an *individual* achievement, as a matter primarily dependent upon and characterized in terms of internal features of the agent and as partly reflective of their essential moral character. The strategies people develop and adopt to manage their lives are reflective of and responsive to their options. And what options people

[29] Happily Melissa passed the test on her second attempt.

have is very often a matter of brute luck. Self-control helps to achieve the good life, but equally social access to those goods can be a condition of and resource for exercises of diachronic self-control. Apparent self-control may thus more often be a manifestation of social privilege than of self-discipline or superior character.

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