

Why Relational Egalitarians Should Care About Distributions

Introduction

Relational views of equality, such as those put forward by Elizabeth Anderson and Samuel Scheffler, argue for a social and political ideal of equality that aims at being a better interpretation of what social justice requires than the prevailing distributive conceptions of equality, especially luck egalitarian views. Yet so far the criticisms raised by relational egalitarians against luck egalitarians have attracted a lot more attention than their own positive proposals; in particular, it is unclear what social justice as relational equality demands in distributive terms. Anderson's discussions of the topic suggest that relational egalitarianism vacates a large part of the terrain of distributive justice in favor of a minimalist, sufficiency view.¹ Scheffler, on the other hand, has not so far spelled out the distributive implications of his view on relationship equality in any detail.² This paper delivers an internal argument against Anderson's view, and argues that a relational egalitarian conception of social justice yields powerful intrinsic and instrumental reasons of justice to care about distributive inequality in socially produced goods—despite its according center stage to just social relationships and not to the distribution of goods per se. The paper is motivated by sympathy for the relational egalitarian view; however, its aim is not to argue for it against rival views—such as luck egalitarianism—but rather to first clarify what kind of view it is, and what connections it has to distributive justice, since this has not so far been adequately done.

Section 1 explains that relational egalitarianism as understood in this paper puts forward an ideal of social justice, not a social ideal of equality independent of justice, and introduces the problem of its connection to

¹Elizabeth Anderson, "What's the Point of Equality?" *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287-337; "Welfare, Work Requirements, and Dependant-Care," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 21 (2004): 243-56; and "How Should Egalitarians Cope with Market Risks?" *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 9 (2008): 239-70.

²Samuel Scheffler, "What is Egalitarianism?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 31 (2003): 5-39; and "Choice, Circumstance, and the Value of Equality," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 4 (2005): 5-28.

distributive justice in particular. Section 2 argues that given their commitment to an ideal of society as a cooperative scheme among equals, relational egalitarians ought to hold that there are intrinsic reasons of justice in favor of limiting distributive inequality in socially produced goods. Sections 3 and 4 deliver additional instrumental reasons for relational egalitarians to limit inequalities of income and wealth: such inequalities engender risks of domination, predominantly through their impact on the workings of political institutions (section 3), and encourage the formation of inegalitarian social status norms that are damaging to the self-respect of the worse off (section 4). Section 5 concludes by applying the arguments made in sections 3 and 4 to the case of equality of opportunity to attain desirable social positions, and shows that justice-based relational egalitarianism is committed to a demanding principle of equality of opportunity so understood.

1. Justice-Based Relational Egalitarianism: The Problem

Relational egalitarianism as understood in this paper is a view about social justice; its aim is to specify rights and duties that individuals have as members of society, and which normally override other social values. It requires that basic social and political institutions enable individuals equally, and adequately, to avoid relationships such as domination and marginalization, and discourage the emergence of objectionable status hierarchies. The objection to such relationships is not merely that they are, in some sense, bad for people, but that they constitute *unjust treatment*: domination involves subjection to the arbitrary exercise of power on the part of somebody else; marginalization involves an unjustified denial of opportunities to participate in basic social and political institutions.³

This focus on unjust inegalitarian relationships is based on concern about what they do to individuals' self-respect, understood as "a sense of themselves as free and effective agents,"⁴ and as participants of equal moral standing in societal cooperation. Take domination: if the dominated understand that they are dominated, that someone can influence their fate simply according to her whims, it is hard to see how this could not diminish their self-respect. Relational egalitarians in the sense used in this paper hence put forward a particular model of social and political relationships as required by justice on grounds of self-respect; in Rawlsian terms, we might say that they seek to equalize the *social bases of*

³See Iris Marion Young's discussion of the "five faces of oppression" in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 48-63.

⁴Scheffler, "Choice, Circumstance, and the Value of Equality," p. 24.

self-respect for all members of society.⁵

In this respect, relational egalitarianism in the sense used in this paper is different from other views of social equality, which regard the case for it as not, or only partly, based on justice, and based instead on an independent value of social equality.⁶ This paper does not discuss these views, but focuses on the distributive implications of relational egalitarianism understood as a theory of justice. A guiding idea of such a view is that appeal to other social egalitarian values supposedly independent of justice can be avoided if it can be shown that the most salient cases of social inequality can, in some way, be traced to unjust treatment—and this paper will argue that even in a case such as that of inequalitarian norms of social status, this is indeed possible (see section 4 and 5). However, more detailed comparison, and confrontation, with views of social equality that are not based on justice is a task for another day; clarity about the distributive implications of justice-based relational equality should facilitate this task.

Following what has just been said, the most important and stringent distributive requirement that follows from the ideal of relational equality

⁵I use the term “social bases of self-respect” (see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 54) instead of “self-respect,” because relational egalitarian views hold that suffering a lack of self-respect constitutes an injustice only if social mechanisms and institutions are responsible for this; see Thomas Scanlon, “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality,” in Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams (eds.), *The Ideal of Equality*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 41–59, at p. 52. Scanlon agrees that caring about equal social bases of self-respect constitutes a properly egalitarian goal (pp. 43, 50). However, he overlooks the close connection between domination and unequal self-respect when he classifies concern about excessive power differentials between individuals as “non-fundamentally egalitarian” (p. 46). Whether Rawls himself is committed to *equal* social bases of self-respect is unclear. In places, this seems to be the case: see *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 474 ff.; however, for contrary textual evidence, see “Social Unity and Primary Goods,” in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 359–87, at p. 363. For a sustained discussion of how Rawlsian “justice as fairness” does better for the social bases of self-respect than conceptions of social justice that guarantee equal basic liberties and equality of opportunity but endorse a less demanding egalitarian distribution than Rawls does, see Joshua Cohen, “Democratic Equality,” *Ethics* 99 (1989): 727–51, pp. 736–43.

⁶For examples of views regarding social equality as a value distinct from justice, see David Miller, “Equality and Justice,” in Andrew Mason (ed.), *Ideals of Equality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 21–36; and Jonathan Wolff, “Fairness, Respect, and the Egalitarian Ethos,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27 (1998): 97–122. For examples of views that draw both on justice and on a value of social equality distinct from justice, see Scanlon, “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality,” and Martin O’Neill, “What Should Egalitarians Believe?” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36 (2008): 119–56. O’Neill develops a pluralist egalitarian position—which he calls “non-intrinsic egalitarianism” (*ibid.*, p. 121)—that is based on a variety of reasons why inequality may not only be unjust, but also bad in other ways (*ibid.*, p. 132).

is, as Anderson puts it, that

[n]egatively, people are entitled to whatever capabilities are necessary to enable them to avoid or escape entanglement in oppressive relationships. Positively, they are entitled to the capabilities necessary for functioning as an equal citizen in a democratic state.⁷

However, neither Anderson nor Scheffler have so far developed a full-fledged account of the distributive requirements of justice-based relational egalitarianism. Anderson’s sketch of such an account spells out three dimensions in which individuals have to have adequate means in order to be able to stand in the required relationship of equality to each other: (a) as human beings—this covers aspects of physical and mental well-being, freedom from (treatable) illness, freedom of movement, and so on; (b) as a worker in a system of cooperation—covering, *inter alia*, the education necessary to carry out a function in the division of labor, and freedom of occupational choice; and (c) as a participant in democratic politics—covering equal rights to political participation and the means necessary to exercise such rights in a meaningful manner.⁸

The main worry that this account faces in the current debates about the value of equality and its connection to social justice is that it displays too little sensitivity to the comparative distribution of material goods in society among its members—that, by seeking to refocus egalitarian theorizing on matters of social and political relationships rather than distributions, it makes the concomitant claim that the distributive sphere is of little importance. This is because Anderson’s account of distributive justice seems to commit her to two claims. First, as several critics have noted, to a sufficiency conception of distributive justice:⁹ such a conception merely demands that individuals be given enough to cross the relevant threshold set by the respective theory of justice—in the case of more

⁷Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality?” p. 316. Anderson spells out the distributive implications of her view of relational equality in terms of *capabilities*, and in discussing her view I will stick to this term. But, for the purposes of the argument of this paper, nothing hinges on endorsing capabilities, resources, or social primary goods as the currency of justice. Sections 3–5 will discuss the particular goods of income, wealth, and opportunity in more detail.

⁸Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality?” pp. 317–18. However, given her focus on social cooperation, Anderson can only be committed to the idea that people are owed *equal* capabilities to function as human beings as a matter of social justice in virtue of their capacity, and willingness, to participate in a system of cooperative production, not simply in virtue of their humanity. This does not rule out duties of distributive justice to noncooperators; it only rules out that these duties are significantly egalitarian: see n. 23 below.

⁹Paula Casal, “Why Sufficiency is not Enough,” *Ethics* 117 (2007): 296–326, pp. 297, 322; Richard Arneson, “Distributive Justice and Basic Capability Equality—‘Good Enough’ is not Good Enough,” in Alexander Kaufman (ed.), *Capabilities Equality—Basic Issues and Problems* (London: Routledge 2006), pp. 17–43, at p. 23.

orthodox sufficiency views,¹⁰ this is often referred to as “a decent life”; in the case of relational egalitarianism, it is the relationship of standing as an equal to others. Distributive inequalities between individuals who are above the threshold are then of no intrinsic concern to social justice.¹¹

Second, Anderson seems to be committed to the claim that the distributive requirements of relational egalitarianism are sufficientarian also in an all-things-considered sense, including possible instrumental rationales for equalizing distributions. Even if distributive inequality is not by itself regarded as a concern for justice, it could be that people stand to each other in the required egalitarian social relationships only under conditions of strict distributive equality; or that this can only be achieved if stringent limits are set to material inequality (as will indeed be argued below in sections 3-5). But Anderson seems to hold—in places, at least—that a reasonably low cut-off point can be found for distributive concerns instrumental to achieving such relationships. For example, she argues that “[m]ost able-bodied citizens ... will get access to the divisible resources they need to function [as an equal in the three dimensions mentioned above] by earning a wage or some equivalent compensation due to them on account of their filling some role in the division of labor,”¹² and that “[o]ne mechanism for achieving a *decent minimum* would be a minimum wage.”¹³ Such claims are decidedly unambitious—the possibly vast disparities between different wages and remunerations for different positions within the societal division of labor are not mentioned. This seems to vindicate the suspicion of distributive egalitarians that relational egalitarianism vacates a large part of the terrain of distributive justice. Among contemporary political theorists, only hard-nosed right-libertarians deny that members of society are owed at least a “decent minimum.” In other places, Anderson’s view seems somewhat more demanding: she also holds that concern for egalitarian relationships

¹⁰Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), chap. 9; Harry Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” *Ethics* 98 (1987): 21-43; “Equality and Respect,” *Social Research* 64 (1997): 3-15; and “The Moral Irrelevance of Equality,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 14 (2000): 87-103; Roger Crisp, “Equality, Priority, and Compassion,” *Ethics* 113 (2003): 745-63; and “Egalitarianism and Compassion,” *Ethics* 114 (2004): 119-26. The argument of this paper does not apply directly to these views, which are sufficientarian “all the way down”; it argues that relational egalitarians cannot be distributive sufficientarians.

¹¹Sufficientarianism would not necessarily be an independent rival position to egalitarianism if it merely claimed that the requirement to raise everybody over the sufficiency threshold enjoyed priority over other justice concerns. The additional claim that inequalities above that threshold are of *no* relevance to justice is needed to turn it into such a distinct position; see Casal, “Why Sufficiency is not Enough,” pp. 299-300.

¹²Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality?” p. 321; see also “Welfare, Work Requirements, and Dependant-Care,” p. 251.

¹³Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality?” p. 325 (emphasis added).

requires constraining top incomes, and argues that egalitarians should prefer that “individuals be crowded in the middle of the distribution”—that is, a large middle class.¹⁴

Scheffler, on the other hand, suggests that a relational understanding of equality can plausibly underpin egalitarian conceptions of distributive justice such as Rawls’s “justice as fairness.”¹⁵ The task of this paper is to spell out the arguments for such a view, and to show that relational egalitarianism, properly understood, has more demanding distributive implications than Anderson seems to think. Such a position does indeed claim that a plausible conception of social justice should regard the avoidance of unjust social relationships as the dominant egalitarian aim of basic social and political institutions, and should not regard distributive equality *per se* as a value of similar stringency. But, as this paper will go on to show, a sufficiency distribution cannot satisfy the requirements of relational equality; on a plausible understanding of such a view, distributive inequality raises concerns of justice for both intrinsic (section 2) and instrumental reasons (sections 3-5).

2. Justifying Inequality

The argument of this section is straightforward: given that relational egalitarians such as Anderson and Scheffler follow Rawls in specifying participation as equals in reciprocal cooperation as the foundational relationship of social justice,¹⁶ they have an intrinsic reason to limit inequality in the goods produced by such cooperation. Relational egalitarians should hence endorse a—defeasible—*presumption of equality*, because such a presumption expresses equal respect for participants in cooperation who jointly produce basic social goods.

Such a position regulates distributive inequality for intrinsic reasons, but differs from purely distributive views such as luck egalitarianism, which regards distributive inequalities for which individuals are not responsible through their own choices as unfair, and hence *pro tanto* unjust, no matter how these inequalities otherwise came about.¹⁷ What it

¹⁴Anderson, “How Should Egalitarians Cope with Market Risks?” p. 267.

¹⁵Scheffler, “What is Egalitarianism?” pp. 22-23, 31.

¹⁶Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality?”; Scheffler, “What is Egalitarianism?” and “Choice, Circumstance, and the Value of Equality,” *passim*.

¹⁷Radical luck egalitarians hence do not ascribe any foundational importance to participation in cooperation, but regard their conception of distributive equality as a direct implication of the abstract moral equality of humans, according to which all humans, qua humans, enjoy a basic equality of moral standing. Arguably, G.A. Cohen, “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,” *Ethics* 99 (1989): 906-44, and Richard Arneson, “Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare,” *Philosophical Studies* 56 (1989): 77-93, are examples

judges to be just or unjust, in the first instance, are not distributions of a given amount of goods among individuals. Rawls calls this the problem of “allocative justice,” and distinguishes it from the problem of distributive justice understood as regulating “a fair system of social cooperation over time.”¹⁸ Distributive justice so understood applies to the social relationships that govern the production and distribution of goods: these relationships are regulated by, in Rawls’s terms, the “basic structure of society,” that is, a society’s main social, political, and economic institutions.¹⁹ These institutions operate so as to guarantee

what we may call pure background procedural background justice. The basic structure is arranged so that when everyone follows the publicly recognized rules of cooperation, and honors the rules the claims specify, the particular distributions of goods that result are acceptable as just ... whatever these distributions turn out to be.²⁰

A system of production can follow pure procedural justice in this sense, and still set overall limits to the distributive inequalities that socio-economic institutions may generate, as long as in doing so it follows general rules that specify acceptable overall distributions in advance, and does not seek to determine which individual gets what exactly. Anderson follows Rawls in understanding the problem of distributive justice as one of the set-up of the basic structure, and agrees that rules implementing “range constraints” on inequality—for example, through a system of social insurance—are compatible with pure procedural justice so understood.²¹

Now, the argument of this section is that individuals’ status as equals in cooperation gives an *intrinsic* reason to introduce range constraints, because they express this equal standing: if the basic structure has to display egalitarian concern for participants in the enterprise of cooperative production that it regulates, then this means that it has to aim at distributing advantages and disadvantages that are socially produced equally, unless there are sufficient reasons for an unequal distribution. Unequal distributions of such goods (and bads) constitute unequal treatment on the part of the basic structure, and have to be justified by justice-relevant reasons.²² It also means that unequal impact of the basic structure on

of such a view. Other egalitarians, such as Ronald Dworkin, single out a different foundational relationship, that of being subject to the coercive laws of the state: Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 1.

¹⁸John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 50.

¹⁹See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 6.

²⁰Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, p. 50.

²¹Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality?” p. 309, and “How Should Egalitarians Cope with Market Risks?” p. 241.

²²For a similar position on socially produced goods, but in the context of an argument focusing not on relational egalitarianism as understood here but on a conception of equal-

other goods that are often considered natural goods, for example, on personal health and genetic endowments (e.g., through socially caused pollution), requires such justification.²³

This Rawlsian view that equal treatment by the basic structure yields a presumption of equality in social goods (and bads) has, of course, been contested by nonegalitarians, and has been subject to intensive debate over the last four decades. This section does not seek to defend it against such rival views; possibly the most notable of these is the view that equal treatment demands rewarding people according to their individual contribution to cooperation, that is, according to their distributive desert. What it argues instead is that justice-based relational egalitarians should subscribe to the Rawlsian view. Regarding desert, both Anderson and Scheffler are indeed skeptical about the existence of independent, pre-institutional criteria that could determine what people individually deserve in distributive terms: they argue that the highly complex division of labor that characterizes advanced economies makes it impossible to determine the value of individual contributions to cooperative production at a fundamental level. Social goods hence have to be regarded as *jointly produced*.²⁴ And they could not easily give up this skepticism: if distribution could and should be undertaken according to desert, it seems that one needs a reason why people’s self-respect, or at least some compo-

ity that can serve as the basis of an “overlapping consensus” along the lines laid out by Rawls in his later work, see Joseph Heath, “Political Egalitarianism,” *Social Theory and Practice* 34 (2008): 486-516. For a detailed exploration of the presumption of equality, but without reference to underlying relationships of social cooperation, see Stefan Gosepath, *Gleiche Gerechtigkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), pp. 200-211.

²³Restricting requirements of limiting inequality to socially produced goods, and to social impact on other goods, does not imply that justice does not require any assistance to those who are naturally disadvantaged—especially those who are permanently excluded from cooperation due to, for example, severe mental handicaps (see n. 8 above). For an argument that an entitlement to a social minimum for noncooperators fits within a Rawlsian framework, see Cynthia A. Stark, “How to Include the Severely Disabled in a Contractarian Theory of Justice,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15 (2007): 127-45. Furthermore, on a relational egalitarian view, natural inequality must not be compounded by social means. In particular, it must not give rise to inequalitarian relationships, such as domination, and this also gives reasons to seek to sever, or at least to weaken, the links between achievement, social status, and self-respect, insofar as achievement is partly determined by natural abilities: see sections 4 and 5 below. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing for clarification of these points at this stage.

²⁴Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality?” pp. 321-22; Samuel Scheffler, “Justice and Desert in Liberal Theory,” in *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 173-96, at pp. 190-91. For a detailed argument that relying on considerations of distributive desert is incompatible with relational egalitarian justice, see Anderson, “How Should Egalitarians Cope with Market Risks?” pp. 247-54.

nents thereof, should not also vary according to such desert.^{25, 26}

If this is so, then a relational egalitarian position that sought to exclude distributive inequality in socially produced goods as such from the scope of social justice, and to restrict itself to demanding that participants in cooperation do not encounter each other in particular unjust egalitarian relationships, such as domination, would be a nonstarter: given people's status as equal producers of social goods, such an exclusion would be arbitrary.

However, what needs to be specified is which kinds of reasons exactly suffice to defeat the presumption of equality. Rawls endorses a very stringent interpretation of the presumption. His "general conception of justice" mandates that "[a]ll social values ... are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone's advantage."²⁷ As is well known, inequality-justifying reasons according to Rawls's conception of justice fall into two large categories: first, rights to basic liberties constraining the maintenance of strict equality (the rationale of Rawls's first principle of justice); and second, reasons of efficiency, demanding a regime of distributive inequality if it leaves the worse off better off than under equality—the rationale of the difference principle, which requires that inequalities in income and wealth be to the greatest possible advantage of the worst off.²⁸

As mentioned before, Scheffler's approach is congenial to Rawls's; Anderson's position is, against that, once more ambiguous: on the one hand, she stresses the ideal of society as a cooperative enterprise among equals throughout, and argues for "a conception of reciprocity that would squeeze the gap between the highest- and lowest-paid workers."²⁹ On the

²⁵Retributive justice is a different issue; see Scheffler, "Justice and Desert in Liberal Theory," pp. 192 ff., for an argument that skepticism regarding distributive desert need not carry over to retributive desert.

²⁶David Miller puts forward a position that seeks to combine the values of distributive desert and social equality. He recommends mixed criteria of distributive justice—equality, desert, and need (see David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chap. 2)—and argues that the value of social equality should also influence a society's distributive practices, even though it does not itself constitute a consideration of justice, but a value apart from it (see Miller, "Equality and Justice"). I argue that Miller's account of the relationship between justice and social equality is vulnerable to inconsistencies, in Christian Schemmel, *Social Justice as Relational Equality* (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2009), chap. 3, section 3.

²⁷Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 54 (my emphasis). The full quotation includes Rawls's list of primary goods as the "social values" in question. I leave out this list because relational egalitarians need not accept it (see n. 7 above), and because they insist on equal social bases of self-respect.

²⁸For criticism of Rawls's reliance on income-based incentives in the argument for the difference principle, see G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), chap. 1.

²⁹Anderson, "What's the Point of Equality?" p. 326.

other, she explicitly argues for range constraints on top and middle incomes beyond safeguarding sufficiency for those at the bottom of the distribution exclusively on the basis of their instrumental contribution to avoiding unjust relationships and status inequality (discussed in sections 3-5).³⁰ She hence seems to overlook the intrinsic reason for limiting distributive inequality: that it expresses respect for people's equal status in the overall relationship of social cooperation.

What drives her view is an emphasis on the capacity of market arrangements to deliver efficient outcomes, because market prices signal more successfully than any other economic arrangement how goods may be efficiently allocated.³¹ Such efficiency may be a reason to accept some distributive inequality, and to do so not only where this benefits the worst off maximally. However, Anderson herself, when acknowledging the need for range constraints on income distributions on instrumental grounds, argues that distributions can be significantly compressed without endangering the signal function of prices.³² Her argument against the difference principle—and against the general conception of justice, since it relies on the same reasoning—is a different one: it is the well-known worry that "[i]n giving absolute priority to the worst off, the difference principle might require considerable sacrifices in the lower middle ranks for trifling gains at the lowest level."³³

This worry seems plausible.³⁴ Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that Rawls's endorsement of the difference principle is based not just on its expressing equal moral status in cooperation, but on a variety of different arguments whose connection to relational egalitarianism is less clear—such as the argument that the difference principle would be chosen in the original position, based on the assumption that risk aversion is the most reasonable attitude towards choice under conditions of radical uncertainty³⁵—and his objection to letting distributive outcomes be determined by "morally arbitrary factors" such as natural abilities, which inspired luck egalitarianism.³⁶ However, even if these points are conceded, the expressive rationale for limiting distributive inequality in social goods still rules out a sufficiency conception of distributive jus-

³⁰Anderson, "How Should Egalitarians Cope with Market Risks?" pp. 263 ff.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 242.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 262.

³³Anderson, "What's the Point of Equality?" p. 326.

³⁴Hard-nosed Rawlsians might, however, want to deny that cases such as the one mentioned above are indeed practically possible, and would ask why, in any given case, better placed groups could not in turn compensate the second worse off. The general conception of justice rules out unjustified inequality between all groups, not just between the worst off and the second worse off. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 71-72.

³⁵Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, pp. 106 ff.

³⁶Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 64-65.

tice. One possibility would seem to be to drop the absolute priority of the worst off in favor of only relative priority, and hence to endorse a prioritarian position.³⁷

Hence, exactly how much distributive equality relational egalitarianism requires on intrinsic grounds may remain an open question. This section has established that relational egalitarians ought to accept a presumption of equality in social goods, because it expresses respect for people's standing as equals in social cooperation, and has shown that Anderson has overlooked this intrinsic rationale for limiting distributive inequality. However, this does not suffice to conclude that only an interpretation of the presumption that is as stringent as Rawls's is capable of expressing due respect for equality in social cooperation, without drawing on additional reasons for limiting distributive inequality.

The next sections will show that relational egalitarianism delivers such additional criteria: on such a view, there are also strong instrumental reasons for limiting inequality of income, wealth, and opportunity. In particular, a commitment to an ideal of society as a cooperative enterprise among equals requires paying particular attention to two areas of concern: first, what distributive inequality enables members of society to do to each other. Distributive inequality might, in instances, be judged unobjectionable when taken in isolation, but might end up being judged impermissible because of the risk of unjust social relationships it gives rise to (section 3). Second, distributive inequality might pose a threat to individuals' social status in society according to prevailing norms, which is internalized in terms of self-respect (section 4). Finally, both these rationales come together in requiring a demanding conception of equality of opportunity (section 5).

3. Domination and Distributive Inequality

This section deals with the first instrumental rationale for limiting permissible distributive inequality: distributive inequalities can lead to unjust social relationships, such as domination, which harm self-respect. As I said in section 1, relational egalitarianism demands equality of the social bases of self-respect; concern about other social values cannot override this requirement. It hence delivers a yardstick with which the presumption of equality discussed above can be filled out with more definite content, and the remainder of the section delivers a first set of reasons why this content will likely be demandingly egalitarian, in material terms.

³⁷See Derek Parfit, "Equality or Priority," Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas (1991), reprinted in Clayton and Williams (eds.), *The Ideal of Equality*, pp. 81-125, at p. 101.

In general, three kinds of policies are open to a basic structure committed to the ideal of relational equality to ward off relational risks. First, *procedural protection*, which offers institutional safeguards against the abuse of holdings and power by those in superior social positions. Second, *sociopsychological protection*: the "engineering" of social attitudes, for example, in school and through the media, which instill a practical sense of basic equality, and of the limited moral importance of de facto inequalities in talents, capacities, and social functions and professions, into the members of a cooperative scheme, so that those occupying superior positions become less disposed to make use of any opportunities of abuse that their positions might offer them. And, third, *distributive policies*, which aim at preventing the abuse of power by limiting material inequalities, so that the advantaged have comparatively less means to buy power. This section is devoted to the third strategy. Its aim is to show that there are good instrumental reasons to think seriously about setting stringent limits to distributive inequality on the basis of relational egalitarian considerations. This might seem perplexing; after all, relational egalitarians present their conception as an alternative to distributive egalitarianism, and, as we have already seen, some of their statements seem to imply that they regard distributive equality as of lesser importance. Anderson claims that

the degree of acceptable income inequality would depend in part on how easy it was to convert income into status inequality—differences in the social bases of self-respect, influence over elections, and the like. The stronger the barriers against commodifying social status, political influence, and the like, the more acceptable are significant income inequalities. The moral status of free market allocations is strengthened the more carefully defined is the domain in which these allocations have free rein.³⁸

This quotation can be read as not only pointing out that distributive inequality is especially troubling if and when it endangers relational equality, but also as making an additional, stronger claim: that relational egalitarians should assign *priority* to strategies and policies that erect barriers against the conversion of wealth and income into status and power; that is, that they should assign priority to sociopsychological and procedural strategies over distributive ones. Even though she endorses, as we have seen, some range constraints on distributions, she holds that these are merely second best, and only come into play where conversion barriers fail.³⁹

Now, sociopsychological and procedural strategies indeed have one crucial advantage over distributive ones: if they are in place and function well, then they implement relational equality *directly*. Strategies of more distributive equality, on the other hand, implement relational equality

³⁸Anderson, "What's the Point of Equality?" p. 326.

³⁹See Anderson, "How Should Egalitarians Cope with Market Risks?" p. 266.

indirectly, that is, only if additional empirical assumptions about how people will use their distributive shares are true. Take access to the media for political purposes as an example: strategies that bar the rich from using their wealth to buy media time implement, if successful, relational equality directly. Against that, a strategy of distributive equality is based on the assumption that people will at least also use their more equal shares to gain access to the media, rather than to merely buy additional consumer goods for themselves.

But this point does not suffice to establish that relational egalitarians should prefer procedural policies over distributive ones. It only makes clear that distributive policies, if not working by themselves, have to be supplemented by additional strategies, such as, to stay with the example, a sociopsychological strategy emphasizing the importance of widespread adequate media access for relational equality, and the unimportance of being able to acquire additional consumer goods once a certain level of affluence is reached—for example, through “citizenship education” in school. On any given issue, the choice of the right policy depends to a large extent on context and empirical circumstances. Sociological and sociopsychological research are needed to comprehensively assess the opportunities for relational injustice that given social scenarios offer to the advantaged, and to give informed guidance as to how these can best be countered. But political theory can make clear that there are several good reasons for denying that procedural and sociopsychological strategies ought to enjoy priority over distributive strategies as a matter of principle, and can hence give guidance for more detailed empirical investigation about which policy to pursue.

This can be shown by focusing on Anderson’s claim about the necessity of blocking exchanges between wealth and other goods, such as status and power. Clearly, some such barriers need to exist.⁴⁰ To some extent, different goods pose different conditions on the adequacy of their distribution and transfer. We want people of superior capacities of political reasoning and rhetoric to be able to enjoy better access to such positions than others, because we think that, other things being equal, the political system works better if it is directed by such people rather than by people who have simply bought their positions of influence. Complete convertibility of wealth into political influence would not be acceptable even if all had equal substantive opportunity to buy such influence. But the relevant question for this section is to what extent convertibility must be blocked in order to make sure *that those with greater distributive*

⁴⁰Anderson’s claim is reminiscent of Michael Walzer’s theory of “complex equality,” according to which the distribution of social goods ought to track the social meaning of these goods in the society in question. See Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

means do not obtain opportunities to dominate others—and to what extent this aim can and should be achieved through other strategies, such as that of equalizing distributions. As far as I can see, two arguments speak in favor of a policy of more distributive equality for relational reasons, and against the general preferability of a policy of blocked exchanges.

First, distributive policies might be less *intrusive*. Strategies of limiting distributive inequality can be preferable to procedural and sociopsychological strategies, where the latter involve heavy interference with liberty. The enforcement of procedural protection might involve potentially problematic invasions of privacy, insofar as it might require close monitoring of the spending patterns of the advantaged. Whether that is especially troubling seems to depend largely on the individual case—there is surely no problem with rigidly enforcing total transparency regarding financial contributions to political candidates and campaigns. But these are only some of the more obvious ways in which wealth may be used to influence politics. What about, for example, throwing parties where important political connections may be made?

The problem hence cuts deeper than that: blocking exchanges between different goods cannot be wholly achieved by procedural protection and law enforcement. These strategies require expansive control of individuals and groups by state agents—control that, for a large part, will have to come after the fact occurred, in the form of sanctions. Other things being equal, a better way to erect conversion barriers is sociopsychological, via self- and peer-control, via the entrenchment of social norms regarding the unacceptability of exchange between different goods. But this constitutes a problem of potential illiberality: relational egalitarians such as Anderson and Scheffler are committed to a Rawlsian principle of liberal neutrality,⁴¹ according to which justice merely sets constraints on the pursuit of individual and collective conceptions of the good; avoidance of domination is one of these constraints. An attempt to fix the social meaning of goods so as to block exchanges restricts the capacity of individuals and groups to figure out for themselves what different goods mean to them. From a liberal point of view, it should be up to people, to the greatest extent possible, to decide what money can and cannot buy.⁴² Of course, it should not directly buy political office, due to

⁴¹Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality?” p. 330. For Scheffler, this is implied by the closeness with which his account tracks Rawls’s; see “What is Egalitarianism?” p. 25, and “Choice, Circumstance, and the Value of Equality,” pp. 18-19. However, he also briefly mentions the possibility of a relational egalitarian ideal that draws on a more comprehensive account of what is good for people (*ibid.*, p. 19).

⁴²Jeremy Waldron, “Money and Complex Equality,” in David Miller and Michael Walzer (eds.), *Pluralism, Justice, and Equality* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 144-70, at pp. 167 ff.

the considerations of functionality and competence mentioned above; but, if somebody whose conception of the good ascribes paramount importance to engagement in politics consequently decides to spend more money on political activity than others do, is it unjust if, other things being equal, she also gains more influence?⁴³ It seems that this is not the case as long as plutocracy is avoided and the rich are not also the powerful, across the board, who use the political system merely to pursue their own interests. As far as the danger of domination is concerned, the problem here really seems to be constituted by a possibly too large distributive inequality and its political consequences, not by the possibility of conversion itself. One might then think about fostering social norms that condemn specifically only the conversion of *greater* wealth into political power. But the question then becomes: how much wealth exactly may be converted? It is hard to see how such norms could be both strong enough to be reasonably effective, and precise enough to apply only to a circumscribed range of cases, and hence avoid illiberality.

This leads to the second point: limiting distributive inequality might be a more *effective* way to implement relational equality than procedural and sociopsychological strategies. If procedural and sociopsychological strategies work, distributive inequality will be relationally harmless. But the effectiveness of these two strategies will always be to some extent precarious, since superior distributive means can and will be used to influence the political process itself, in open attempts to change procedural and sociopsychological norms or prevent them from being enacted, for example, through media pressure, or covert attempts to make their subversion easier by lobbying for loopholes and deliberately vague legislation. Keeping distributive inequality in place hence means leaving the weapons in the possession of the advantaged, and merely prohibiting their use—as opposed to real disarmament. Furthermore, unequal distributive scenarios, such as concentration of the ownership of the means of production, introduce greater risks of misrepresentation into the political system. If the means of production are concentrated among a section of the population, and this section manages to act as a political unit, this makes it easier for its members to present their sectarian interests as the interests of “the economy” in general, and thus press for legislation that introduces opportunities for them to dominate others.⁴⁴ Superior distributive means hence give the advantaged the instruments to hollow out the

⁴³Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, p. 195.

⁴⁴Such problems of “concentrated interests” harming the public good exist not only in the case of the rich: for concentrated interests, it is always easier to convert money into influence than for diffuse interests. But the problem is worse if the concentrated interests in question can additionally draw on much more money than the diffuse interests. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing for clarification on this point.

system of relational protection in various ways. More distributive equality, if coupled with enough political alertness of citizens in general, can help prevent such scenarios from arising in the first place.⁴⁵

Neither of these two considerations suffices to fully determine policy. They need to be validated and supplemented by detailed empirical research. However, they do make clear that relational egalitarianism might have much more demandingly egalitarian consequences in terms of distributions than is presently thought in the literature, both by relational egalitarians, such as Anderson, and their adversaries.⁴⁶ At the very least, the ideal of relational equality delivers a set of interesting questions to ask, for empirical researchers as well as for decision-makers concerned about distributive policies. In cases in which unacceptable power differentials can best be tackled by reducing distributive inequality, social justice as relational equality mandates this reduction.⁴⁷

4. Social Status Norms and Distributive Inequality

The second group of instrumental arguments against inequality of income and wealth centers on cases in which the worse off are deprived of the social bases of self-respect because, due to their distributive disadvantage, they are assigned inferior social status, according to prevailing social norms. Such inegalitarian status norms are inherently contrary to the relational egalitarian ideal of social justice. It is possible to regard such cases as themselves instances of unjust social relationships: if, for

⁴⁵For reasons such as these (and others), the later Rawls regards redistributive welfare capitalism, which leaves the ownership of the means of production in the hands of relatively few, as an insufficient implementation of “justice as fairness,” and endorses “property-owning democracy,” characterized by widely spread ownership of such means: *Justice as Fairness*, pp. 131, 139–40. See also the conclusion of this paper.

⁴⁶In Anderson’s defense, it needs to be pointed out that part of the ambition of her writings on relational equality is to make policy proposals for real-world scenarios, particularly for the United States. Some of her claims hence incorporate judgment about which more modest reforms seem currently feasible in the U.S., given rooted ideological traditions and potential unwillingness of sections of the population to go along with more demanding reforms. See Anderson, “Welfare, Work Requirements, and Dependant-Care,” pp. 252, 255. It is hard to disagree that large-scale redistribution of the means of production is not possible in the U.S. at the moment. But then, whether the successful blocking of conversion of wealth into power is currently any more feasible also seems an open question.

⁴⁷Among sufficientarians (see n. 10 above), Frankfurt harbors most sympathy for relational egalitarian considerations: “[I]t may be maintained that inequalities in the distribution of economic benefits are to be avoided because they lead invariably to undesirable discrepancies of other kinds—for example, in social status, in political influence, or in the abilities of people to make effective use of their various opportunities and entitlements.” Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” p. 24.

example, poverty leads to shame, through an internalized social norm mandating what counts as an acceptable standard of living, and shame leads to a withdrawal from public life, the poor will be marginalized, on top of the other evils associated with poverty—and marginalization is, other things being equal, an unjust social relationship.⁴⁸ Similarly, one might argue, somewhat more remotely, that such cases constitute domination by the basic structure of society, since the basic structure influences one's life without a proper regard for one's interests, namely, not to be made to feel shame because one has so little. Nevertheless, status inequality cases merit separate treatment, since this clarifies the range and diversity of implications of relational egalitarianism. This section therefore focuses on the general norms of social acceptability that determine status, whether or not any particular group in society can be held especially responsible for the existence of these norms. In short, it is more about unequal status in a pure sense than about unequal power, and asks whether and how limiting distributive inequality can address the problem.

But before tackling this question, it is important to disentangle the problem of status from the problem of *envy*. Unlike Rawls's attempt to deal with the problem, the argument of this section does not hinge on the psychological feeling of envy. Rawls argues that

[s]ociety may permit such large disparities in ... goods that under existing social conditions these differences cannot help but cause a loss of self-esteem. For those suffering this hurt, envious feelings are not irrational; the satisfaction of their rancor would make them better off. When envy is a reaction to the loss of self-respect in circumstances where it would be unreasonable to expect someone to feel differently, ... it is excusable.⁴⁹

However, there is something plausible in the conviction that it can never be justified to experience a loss of self-respect, and a consequential feeling of envy, merely because of the fact that others have more than oneself.⁵⁰ This conviction is, among others, what drives the view that if, in material terms, all have enough to satisfy their personal needs and individual interests, the appropriate reaction to material inequality is indifference.⁵¹ Similarly, Anderson is rightly hostile to conceding envy such a role in the justification of principles of social justice: "To even offer one's envy as a reason to the envied to satisfy one's desire is profoundly

⁴⁸That is, unless overriding reasons of justice can be given in favor of some form of marginalization, such as that it constitutes adequate punishment for a crime.

⁴⁹Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 468.

⁵⁰A note of clarification regarding the relationship between self-respect and the feeling of envy: I take a disposition to feel envy at other's holdings, fortune, or talents, as (partly) constitutive of low self-respect, not as causally distinct from it.

⁵¹See Frankfurt, "Equality as a Moral Ideal," pp. 22-23.

disrespectful."⁵² What is largely missing in Rawls's account is an explanation of how exactly "existing social conditions" can make it reasonable and justified to feel envy as a reaction to "large disparities in goods."⁵³ Under which conditions should one regard such disparities as endangering the equal social bases of self-respect for the worse off? This is a normative question about the justice of the social conditions in question, not a psychological question about people's tendencies to be envious. In particular, the question is how such conditions may endanger the social bases of self-respect of the worse off even if the overall distribution of goods fulfills the criteria set out in the preceding sections.

The answer to this is that even inequalities that would otherwise be acceptable may give rise to the formation and maintenance of inequalitarian status norms. Distributions influence norms of social acceptability, which in turn govern the appropriateness of emotions like shame that accompany such norm-based judgments of acceptability.⁵⁴ Such norms may influence behavior in such a way that those who fail to meet the standard are treated by others in ways that make their inferiority clear to them—even if, as Scanlon rightly notes, it need not be the point of that treatment to express their inferiority.⁵⁵ Such standards can be merely an expression of what most people regard as desirable achievements in life, and to which they hence orient their behavior, thereby giving others incentives to do likewise, and (inadvertently) penalizing those who do not want to, or cannot, live up to them.

This can happen in myriad ways. Here is just one example: imagine a society in which middle-class parents take great care to select the playmates of their children, and discourage them from playing with children

⁵²Anderson, "What's the Point of Equality?" p. 307. She argues this against Dworkin's proposal to determine just individual holdings by recourse to an envy-test; but Dworkin actually relies on a different, more technical notion of envy. Anderson's point applies better to a more everyday notion of envy like the one preoccupying Rawls.

⁵³Rawls's treatment of the relationship between material inequality, status, and self-respect is ambiguous. As we have seen, he is sensitive to the problem, but in places also claims that, ideally, equality of basic liberties as demanded by his first principle of justice should suffice to take care of it; see *A Theory of Justice*, p. 478.

⁵⁴For example, Adam Smith defines "necessaries" as "not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without." He regarded a linen shirt and leather shoes as such necessaries in his days, since "[t]he poorest creditable person, of either sex, would be ashamed to appear in public without them." Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Roy Campbell and Andrew Skinner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976 [1776]); see Anderson, "What's the Point of Equality?" p. 320, and "How Should Egalitarians Cope with Market Risks?" p. 266.

⁵⁵See Scanlon, "The Diversity of Objections to Inequality," pp. 52-53.

from poorer, or less educated, backgrounds.⁵⁶ It is hard to deny that children from poorer backgrounds (and their parents) are, in such cases, treated in ways that make clear to them that they are socially inferior. But it need not be the point of this treatment to express their inferiority. Parents may simply think that playing with children from more well-placed backgrounds will better enable their children to develop skills that they will need in later life in order to succeed according to prevailing social standards. They could, to an extent, even be right about this. And they could act in this way while happily paying all the taxes that justice requires them to pay for the benefit of the worse off (see section 2).

Hence, a loss of self-respect and feelings of envy as the result of an interpersonal comparison between the holdings of different individuals, carried out by them in private, is not the relevant case for relational egalitarians. Status norms are publicly known and have pervasive influence on the behavior of members of a society towards each other. Feelings such as envy and shame (or apathy and resignation) among the worse off are reasonable and justified if they can be traced to such norms. But such norms are a problem of justice even where they happen to fail to produce such feelings—for example, among those of the worse off that have a particularly robust, or impervious, psychological constitution. And conversely, such feelings are not a problem of justice where they cannot be traced to such norms. Focusing on envy instead of social status norms gets the problem back to front.

The tendency to status norm formation is, of course, not a conceptual truth, but based on a general empirical assumption about human societies. Status norms and their relation to distributions vary across societies; detailed empirical research is needed in order to answer the questions, “When exactly does distributive inequality give rise to status differences that constitute a threat to the social bases of self-respect?” and “When does more distributive equality constitute the appropriate remedy?” Relational egalitarians have to find the right balance of sociopsychological and distributive strategies; only strategies of procedural protection can clearly be judged less appropriate, since law and political institutions do not constitute very effective tools for changing norms governing social status, but can only rein in further opportunities for domination of the status disadvantaged by the advantaged (see section 3). There is no reason to suppose that strategies of distributive equalization should be ruled out, or regarded as second best—even if remedies to the impact of unequal distribution on status inequality can cut both ways.

Take an example involving inequalities in income and wealth: if in-

⁵⁶For an account of how childhood experiences differ across social class in the U.S., see Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

come and wealth are sufficiently reined in through a strategy of “blocked exchanges,” and more money can serve predominantly only as a means for the acquisition of more consumer goods, and—as must always be the case (see section 2)—other justice-relevant reasons for permitting distributive inequalities exist, then a sociopsychological strategy can be appropriate, challenging such norms; for example, by pointing out in school that there is no good reason to link social acceptability to the wearing of brand-name clothes. We might hold that the fundamental problem here is not inequality in income and wealth, but a—historically and socially contingent—spirit of “possessive individualism,”⁵⁷ which connects status too closely to possession of material goods. Parallel to challenging such norms, attempts could be made to encourage the formation of a plurality of different social groups with divergent standards for assigning status, thus discouraging the formation of society-wide and uniform status norms that facilitate the emergence of objectionable status hierarchies.⁵⁸

This then suggests that the limits set by concern for the social bases of self-respect on income disparity are not easily pinned down, and might turn out to be quite permissive. On the other hand, paralleling the argument of section 3, a strategy of more distributive equality will make it less likely that problematically inegalitarian social norms will emerge, in the first place, since unless the conversion of wealth into status is constantly and effectively blocked, the better off will continue to enjoy greater opportunity to form society-wide social norms that exclude and marginalize others who cannot live up to the standards of living set by these norms. If the better off were a clearly circumscribed, not too large group, with group standards of their own, but these did not impact on society-wide social norms any more than those of any other group, the problem would indeed be smaller. But it is hard to see how a basic structure could guarantee not only blocked exchanges, but also the right sizes of the relevant groups in question that effectively prevent the formation of problematic status norms. To be more precise, it is hard to see how a basic structure could guarantee this without becoming intolerably intrusive, without violating the limits of state coercion that a *liberal* conception of social justice must respect. Just think about the scenario where the better off are the vast majority of the population, and a societal underclass, even though enjoying what might be regarded as sufficient material means in absolute terms, still falls so far short of the wealth level of the majority that they cannot meet society-wide standards of social ac-

⁵⁷This label is borrowed from C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1962).

⁵⁸See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 470, on “noncomparing groups”; Scanlon, “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality,” pp. 55-56; and Anderson, “How Should Egalitarians Cope with Market Risks?” p. 264.

ceptability as equals.⁵⁹ It seems absurd to think that the right basic structural response here is to seek to get the majority not to create such status norms, rather than to lift the wealth level of the disadvantaged group, even if the consequence is not that the norm vanishes, but only that all satisfy it.

Relational egalitarians hence have to be sensitive to the threats to self-respect posed by the effect of distributive inequality on norms governing social status. Relational egalitarian distributions will have to vary with the impact of the overall level of income and wealth of a given society, and their distribution, on such norms. It might be true that a society of individualists without any tendency to form status norms would be better, from many points of view. But as I said, achieving such a society has to fall within the limits of what a liberal basic structure may do to those that are subject to its power; and, crucially, this is not merely a problem of “nonideal theory.” The fundamental problem is not that people act unjustly by discriminating against each other, and that this cannot be prevented without too much repression, so that other remedies need to be found. As we have seen, the status norms in question do not have to have discrimination as their purpose. They may simply express what people in the society in question regard as desirable aims for their lives. Thus it seems that the alternative to the pluralistic strategy argued for in this section—encouraging a pluralism of aims and limiting distributive inequality—would have to be to rule out as altogether unjust all those aims whose widespread adoption might lead to the formation of inegalitarian status norms. This would no longer be a liberal view of social equality.

5. Relational Equality and Equality of Opportunity

How does the instrumental framework laid out in the preceding two sections for the case of income and wealth apply to the good of opportunity? First, there is a strong link between inequality of opportunity and scenarios

⁵⁹This scenario is arguably what drives the currently dominant methodology of poverty assessment in affluent Western societies: for example, the OECD statistics on poverty in developed Western countries define relative poverty as *having less than half of the median income* in the society in question. See Michael Foerster and Marco Mira d’Ercole, “Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries in the Second Half of the 1990s,” *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers* 22 (2005), <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/48/9/34483698.pdf>, p. 3. Another possible reason for a relative poverty measurement could be that under income inequality, markets might stop producing the goods that the worse off need. See Alan Ryan, “Does Inequality Matter—For Its Own Sake?” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 19 (2002): 225–43, p. 238. In such a case, money income itself becomes, to that extent, a positional good. For a discussion of positional goods, see Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, “Equality, Priority, and Positional Goods,” *Ethics* 116 (2006): 471–97.

of domination, and second, there is good reason to regard the connection between opportunities and social status as less contingent than the one between status and income and wealth. Opportunity hence turns out to be the easier case for relational egalitarianism. Accordingly, social justice as relational equality does not require a demanding conception of equality of opportunity for desirable goods overall; but it does require a demanding conception of *equality of opportunity to attain desirable social positions*.

Most of the recent debate on equality of opportunity has focused on equality of opportunity in education.⁶⁰ This section has a more limited focus: it focuses on equality of opportunity to obtain social positions and offices to which social and economic advantages are attached,⁶¹ and applies to equality of opportunity in education only insofar as it is instrumental to the former. The previous sections have made clear that relational egalitarianism does not support a case for equality of opportunity for overall attainment of desirable goods in life, of which complete equality of educational opportunity would be an instance; it relies instead on a defeasible presumption that social goods, including education, ought to be distributed equally.⁶² It does, however, require strictly that every member of society is given the educational resources necessary to be able to avoid relational injustice.⁶³

Similarly, justice does not require substantive equality of opportunity between individuals of equal talent and commitment across *all* positions in the socio-economic division of labor, as long as the social, economic, and political spheres are generally organized in a manner that is beneficial to everybody (see section 2). This includes stringent measures against nepotism and corruption, and the effective eradication of discrimination on grounds of pre-identifiable group characteristics, such as sex, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, and disability (“formal” equality of opportunity). But it is no more a social injustice if equally talented and commit-

⁶⁰Adam Swift, *How Not to be a Hypocrite: School Choice for the Morally Perplexed* (London: Routledge, 2003), and “The Morality of School Choice Reconsidered: A Response,” *Theory and Research in Education* 2 (2004): 323–42; Elizabeth Anderson, “Rethinking Equality of Opportunity: Comment on Adam Swift’s ‘How Not to Be a Hypocrite,’” *Theory and Research in Education* 2 (2004): 99–110, and “Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective,” *Ethics* 117 (2007): 595–622; Debra Satz, “Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship,” *Ethics* 117 (2007): 623–48; Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, “Educational Equality versus Educational Adequacy: A Critique of Anderson and Satz,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26 (2009): 117–28.

⁶¹Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 72.

⁶²Defenders of an ideal of complete educational equality of opportunity based on luck egalitarian fairness also concede that their ideal has to be balanced against other values; see Brighouse and Swift, “Educational Equality versus Educational Adequacy,” p. 118.

⁶³Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality?” pp. 318 ff., 328.

ted people do not make it into equal social positions, because they are differentially lucky at, for example, meeting the right people at the right time, than it is if two people of equal attractiveness end up with unequally attractive partners for reasons beyond their control.

But this is merely to repeat that relational egalitarianism differs from radical luck egalitarianism. Relational egalitarianism yields a rationale for a demanding conception of equality of opportunity, in the sense in which the term is generally used in political discourse—regarding access to desirable social positions and offices. First of all, there is a special case of equality of opportunity based on the requirement to avoid risk of domination (see section 3). This concerns access to positions that confer decision-making power, and applies in particular to top positions—the positions of decision-makers in politics and the bureaucracy, in influential media, and in the economic sphere, such as corporate executives. Generally, relational egalitarianism mandates that decision hierarchies are as flat as possible, and offer only minimal opportunities for power abuse; but, for cooperation to be successful, some positions of power have to exist, and insofar as they do, they will always give some people some opportunity to abuse this power, no matter how well controlled and circumscribed they are.

For reasons of avoidance of such domination, it is then imperative that this elite (if it may be so called in a relational egalitarian society) be highly permeable, and not constituted by persons predominantly drawn from a narrowly confined social class. Otherwise, it might degenerate into a closed sub-society of family dynasties and personal acquaintance, with its own norms of behavior and social intercourse, which serve to exclude people from other social layers. In such a scenario, a body of privileged people in positions of power emerges, or maintains itself, who are neither sincerely willing nor able to properly take into account the interests of the people affected by their decisions.⁶⁴ This is a reason to give special attention to the development of talents from families and social backgrounds that have not hitherto had access to top positions, not out of considerations of individual fairness, but based on the wider social and political importance of these positions. At the same time, special attention to talents from such backgrounds clarifies the permeability of society not only to the talented people in question, but to all members of their social layers, and hence serves to discourage an attitude of servility and deference,⁶⁵ which in turn makes it less likely that powerful individuals can get away with using the opportunities for abuse that their positions will offer.

⁶⁴Anderson, "Fair Opportunity in Education," pp. 598-606, 616.

⁶⁵Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship," p. 625.

Second, paralleling the argument of section 4, there is an instrumental case for a demanding conception of equality of opportunity based on considerations of social status. The link between status and desirable social positions is arguably stronger, and less contingent, than in the case of inequality of income and wealth. Even if it should be possible, through a strategy of deemphasizing the social importance of money, and the encouragement of the formation of noncomparing groups, to largely sever the link between possession of income and wealth and social status, a parallel strategy for severing the link between positions of influence and social status seems much less promising. To be sure, many positions are assigned social status that they should not have, due to unjustifiable but historically entrenched norms governing the perceived worth of the profession in question; relational egalitarianism objects to such status norms as every liberal theory does. The proper response here is to eliminate the norm; ensuring fair opportunity to attain such a position can always only be second best. But, insofar as the positions in question rightly confer power, it is almost impossible to think that they should not also confer status: for social cooperation to function properly, the power attached to decision-making positions must not be exercised as "naked" power, but as power based on respect and perceived authority, which are (partly) constitutive of status. It is hence less convincing to claim that people should not assign status to such positions than it is in the case of money. This phenomenon need not be restricted to top positions, as long as reasonable differentiations between different groups of social positions can be made: for example, low-skill jobs involving no powers over others will likely always be at the bottom of the status hierarchy.

There is hence a status problem that cannot reasonably be regarded as fully eliminable, even if all positions in question are properly designed and circumscribed, all irrational status norms, discrimination, and economically detrimental practices (such as nepotism and corruption) are abolished, and the link between wealth and status is broken. The problem exists even if institutions have done everything they can to make sure that the people who occupy the positions really are the most qualified. It appears in two guises: first, it might be the case that the people who end up being most qualified for the positions in question predominantly come from certain social groups and layers—say, the upper and middle classes. People from disadvantaged backgrounds are effectively denied access, because they (or their parents) lack the resources to develop their talents properly. If this happens, they are to this extent marginalized and disenfranchised, and this is a reason for them to regard their self-respect as lowered, and to consequently regard themselves as social inferiors. This is another reason for relational egalitarians to devote substantial resources to offsetting the effects of disadvantaged background on the de-

velopment of talents.⁶⁶

But, second, what about those who, even under highly permeable social arrangements, would suffer from low self-respect because they simply lack the talents needed to occupy a desirable position,⁶⁷ no matter how good a training they might be given—say, they just do not have the necessary natural abilities? As I said, it would be unreasonable to hope that differential social status can be abolished, and, in the case of status attached to positions of power, fewer counterstrategies seem available than in the case of income and wealth. But precisely because status differences cannot be eradicated, a relational egalitarian society should consciously and constantly seek to keep alive a sense of fundamental equality independent of people's particular characteristics and achievements, and, to that extent, seek to break at least the link between status and self-respect. Any ideal of social and political equality must emphasize "the irrelevance of individual differences for fundamental social and political purposes."⁶⁸ This can happen symbolically, for example, in political rhetoric, and in norms of everyday intercourse that influence the assignment of social status. Ensuring that material rewards attached to desirable social positions are moderate has a symbolic dimension as well.

Conclusion

Relational egalitarian views have come to the forefront mainly as criticisms of other egalitarian views, such as, in particular, luck egalitarianism. This paper has contributed to shaping the positive contours of such a view by clarifying its distributive implications. These implications are more demanding than both its proponents and its opponents currently think. Social justice as relational equality requires setting stringent limits on distributive inequality: it recognizes both intrinsic reasons of justice in favor of distributive equality in social goods between participants of equal standing in social cooperation, and a set of additional instrumental reasons for limiting distributive inequality, in order to avoid risks of un-

⁶⁶How far exactly this requirement approaches Rawlsian "fair equality of opportunity," which demands the removal of all effects of social class on natural talent (*A Theory of Justice*, p. 63), is a question for further discussion. The right to a meaningful family life speaks against the removal of all family-transmitted advantage, at least insofar as it is nonfinancial. Both points are at least implicitly acknowledged by Rawls himself (see *ibid.*, pp. 64, 448).

⁶⁷Scanlon, "The Diversity of Objections to Inequality," p. 55.

⁶⁸Scheffler, "What is Egalitarianism?" p. 22. Bernard Williams discusses a similar tension between equality of opportunity and equality as a *humanitarian* ideal: see "The Idea of Equality," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 230-49, at p. 247.

just relationships, and the emergence of status norms that threaten the social bases of self-respect for the worse off.

Whether the relational egalitarian view of social justice is the best available view about the relationship between justice and equality remains to be seen. Showing that its distributive implications are both reasonably precise and plausible goes some way towards this end; but at least two tasks have to be accomplished in order to make a more conclusive case for it. First, it has to be confronted in detail with the views mentioned in section 1 that regard relational equality not, or not only, as a requirement of social justice, but as an independent social and political value, in order to ascertain which of these two views delivers the better combination of capacity to account for the various facets of social equality on the one hand, and theoretical unity and parsimony on the other. Second, other elements of this view need to be fleshed out. To conclude, I shall mention two such elements: first, as we have seen, relational egalitarianism draws heavily on the importance of egalitarian self-respect. Hence, an account of the precise notion of self-respect that it relies on has to be given, explaining in which sense self-respect is a psychological phenomenon, and in which sense it has to be regarded as containing objective, moral elements. Second, while this paper has focused on distributions, relational egalitarians have to pay particular attention to *how* such distributions come about, that is, to the question of which kind of socio-economic arrangements best succeed at treating people as social and political equals while bringing about permissible distributive outcomes. Can welfare states be so reformed as to be up to the task, or do they have to be supplemented with additional elements, such as an unconditional basic income? Or do they even have to be replaced with different arrangements that fundamentally restructure the ownership of the means of production, such as a "property-owning democracy,"⁶⁹ or a liberal version of socialism?⁷⁰

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⁶⁹See n. 45 above.

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