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Power and Equality

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A number of democratic theorists have recently sought to vindicate the ideal of political equality (that is, the ideal of an equal distribution of political power) by tying it to the intrinsic value of egalitarian relationships. According to these “social” or (as I will usually say) “relational egalitarian” arguments for distributing political power equally, such a distribution is an essential component of certain intrinsically valuable relationships, and required for ours to be a “society of equals.”¹

The motivation for adopting such a relational egalitarian account of political equality is twofold. The first is a matter of “fit.” Many citizens of democratic societies accept that there is distinctive value in democratic decision-making. Similarly, many citizens accept that there is distinctive authority associated with democratic decisions. Neither this value nor this authority seems to be fully accounted for by appeal to procedure-independent outcome considerations. Instead they appear to depend on the egalitarian character of democratic procedures: making decisions as equals is intuitively of independent moral significance. Yet articulating what the significance of egalitarian procedures consists in, in a way that accommodates its (at least partial) independence from non-procedural considerations, has been difficult. Relational egalitarian arguments, many of their proponents think, provide a relatively straightforward explanation of why procedurally egalitarian decision-making matters.

¹ (Scheffler 2015), p. 21. Relational (or “social”) egalitarian arguments for democracy or political equality are suggested in, e.g., (Anderson 1999, 2010, 2012; Kolodny 2014a, 2014b; Viehoff 2014; Scheffler 2015). Though Thomas Christiano’s argument for democracy, in (Christiano 2008), shares some features with relational egalitarian accounts, it is sufficiently different not to be easily subsumed under this header, and so I will set it aside here.

But relational egalitarian accounts do not merely fit existing intuitions about the importance of political equality. They also (and this is the second reason for adopting them) promise to provide independent support for our commitment to this ideal. One of the main challenges in defending procedural egalitarian commitments is to escape the worry that one has simply restated, in slightly different terms, the very democratic intuition one is trying to justify. Relational egalitarian arguments avoid this concern by highlighting these commitments' continuity with other values we care about outside of politics narrowly conceived. Even those who are not already wedded to democratic procedures, or who are uncertain of their democratic commitments, may recognize that equality is an ideal central to many of our relationships. If that ideal carries over—directly or indirectly—from these relationships to our political arrangements, and if it requires an egalitarian distribution of decision-making power, then this could provide independent support for democratic procedures and the demands they make on us.

I am sympathetic to the relational egalitarian approach. And yet I have come to think that vindicating the ideal of political equality on its basis is more challenging than has often been recognized. To explain what the challenge consists in is the purpose of this chapter. I begin, in Section 1, by explaining what the project of vindicating the ideal of political equality amounts to. Section 2 outlines the basic structure of the relational egalitarian argument for political equality, and highlights a significant ambiguity in it. Two different paradigmatic examples of egalitarian relationships commonly underpin these arguments for democracy: that of an egalitarian society, a society in which everyone has equal social status (rather than the kind of unequal status we associate with hierarchical societies governed by, e.g., caste or class structures); and that of egalitarian relationships, such as friendships or marriages among equals. These two examples, though plausibly related, are not neatly aligned. And, I argue in Sections 3 to 6, they have different implications for the distribution of power, and the applicability of relational egalitarian intuitions to our political community. While egalitarian relationships like friendship do include a positive requirement of equal power, the ideal of equal status does not. It merely demands that unequal power be socially justified in some ways (ways that are compatible with our basic moral equality) and not others (ways that are not). And while the ideal of equal status straightforwardly applies to large political communities, it is open to doubt whether the ideals associated with friendship do; and even if these doubts can be overcome (or at least kept in check), the resulting picture makes the value and authority of democratic institutions much more conditional on the actual attitudes

of citizens (historic and contemporary) than defenders of the ideal of political equality may have hoped for.

1.

Political equality is a matter of how political power is distributed among the members of a particular group. Political power is constituted by the opportunity to influence political decisions, which usually take the form of laws and other directives that are regularly coercively enforced against, or widely considered binding for, the group's members.² So to have equal political power is to have an equal opportunity to influence political decisions that apply to one's group.³

What does it take to vindicate the ideal of political equality, by which I mean, vindicate that political equality is an ideal or value in its own right? It is not enough to show that egalitarian political institutions (institutions which distribute political power equally) are in fact valuable, as their value could derive from considerations that are quite independent of political equality. As Steven Wall has pointed out, "For the ideal of political equality to be vindicated, it must be shown to be more than a mere by-product of a sound justification."⁴ This means, for instance, that a vindication of political equality cannot rest on purely instrumental defenses of democracy: even if these defenses could establish that some egalitarian distribution of decision-making power would best bring about good outcomes (suitably specified), the value of the egalitarian distribution would be derived from the value of the outcomes, which is specifiable without reference to political equality.

² So not all power is political power, and a commitment to equal political power need not go hand in hand with a commitment to equal power more generally. But our concern with equal political power is plausibly not unrelated to a broader concern with equal power, and an account of political equality and its value should elucidate that relation.

³ Two points are worth flagging. First, the opportunity to influence, rather than actual influence, is what matters here because someone may have equal power yet fail to exercise it. Second, an opportunity to influence must be distinguished from an opportunity to acquire an opportunity to influence. If I can only vote at time t_2 if I register at time t_1 , then I have an opportunity at t_1 to acquire the opportunity to influence the decisions at t_2 . But this doesn't mean that I have the power at t_1 to influence the decision. And if I fail to register at t_1 , I lack the opportunity to influence the decision at t_2 , and thus lack the relevant power. This is a conceptual point about power, separable from the normative question whether my having, but not using, an (equal) opportunity to register at t_1 bears on whether I can complain that I lack (equal) political power at t_2 .

⁴ (Wall 2007), p. 417.

But even among theories that treat political equality as more than a mere by-product, it is worth drawing a distinction between those that treat political equality as an ideal in its own right, and those that do not. What would it be to treat political equality as more than a mere by-product and yet not as an ideal in its own right? On some views, equality simply sets a *moral baseline* from which distributions of political power must start. If there is no (adequate) reason for distributing power differently—to move away from the baseline—then there is reason to distribute it equally. (In Isaiah Berlin's words, "equality needs no reasons, only inequality does so . . ." ⁵) But though equality is (on such views) special because it sets the baseline, and any move away from it requires justification, it is also *nothing but a baseline*. If there is a good reason to move away from the baseline—a good reason for an unequal distribution—then equality does not provide a countervailing reason to stick (or remain close) to an equal distribution. Putting the point slightly technically: On the baseline view, the presence of reasons for an unequal distribution does not simply outweigh the reasons we have to distribute power equally. Rather, insofar as equality is nothing but a baseline, the presence of suitable considerations favoring inequality cancels the reason we would otherwise have had to distribute power equally. Equality, in such cases, can make a non-instrumental contribution to the realization of some non-derivatively valuable good; but it is not itself an essential component of that good, insofar as that good can in principle be realized even under conditions of inequality.

To make this quite abstract point more concrete, consider an influential position in democratic theory with such a "baseline" structure: David Estlund's argument for democracy by appeal to a "reasonable acceptability requirement," and in particular his proposal that democracy is distinctly acceptable because its justification can avoid making "invidious comparisons" among citizens. ⁶ As some critics have pointed out, Estlund builds into his account of political justification a basic asymmetry between unequal and equal relations of rule. ⁷ Thus, when Estlund concludes that a democratic—egalitarian—distribution of political power is acceptable where a non-egalitarian is not, the endorsement of political equality is *not a mere by-product* of a justification that is otherwise unconcerned with an equal distribution of power. Nonetheless, what Estlund is *ultimately* concerned with is not whether power is distributed equally, but whether its distribution can be justified

⁵ (Berlin 1999 [1956]), p. 84.

⁶ (Estlund 2008), p. 37: "[i]nvidious comparisons purport to establish the authority and legitimate power of some over others in ways that universal suffrage does not, and so invidious comparisons must meet a burden of justification that universal suffrage does not."

⁷ See, e.g., (Arneson 2009) and (Kolodny 2014a).

to all qualified points of view. So if an unequal distribution can be justified without invidious comparison, and is acceptable to all qualified points of view, the fact that the distribution deviates from standards of equality is not regrettable, because an equal distribution of power is not a value in its own right.

By contrast, on other views, an equal distribution of political power is not simply a baseline, nor a mere by-product, but instead an ideal in its own right. On such views, there are non-instrumental reasons in favor of distributing power equally; and these reasons survive the presence of reasons against doing so. Many democratic theorists believe that these reasons in favor of political equality prevail against most competing reasons in favor of an unequal distribution of power. For the purposes of clarifying the conceptual point at issue, however, this is less important than another observation: even if the reasons for distributing political power unequally prevail, they do not *cancel* the reasons favoring political equality. They *merely outweigh* them. And so there is something to regret where we cannot realize simultaneously the value that speaks in favor of political equality and the value that speaks in favor of political inequality. On such a view, equality is either itself a non-derivatively valuable good, or (more plausibly) an essential component of such a good. In either case we can sensibly think of it as being an ideal in its own right, insofar as whatever gives us reason to realize equality can itself not be understood without it.⁸

This distinction, between views that treat equality as a mere by-product, a mere baseline, or an ideal in its own right, seems to me of general theoretical interest for thinking about political equality (and indeed equality more generally). But, more importantly for the purposes of this chapter, the distinction is relevant because, as I understand them, relational egalitarian arguments for political equality generally aspire to vindicating it as an ideal in its own right.⁹ Indeed, it may plausibly be among the main motivations for relational egalitarian views that they promise to establish something more than a mere by-product or baseline justification of equality (political and other). I do not purport to show here that this aspiration is worth sharing. I merely mean to point out that it sets a standard against which to assess the success of relational egalitarian arguments.

⁸ So to say that political equality is an ideal in its own right is not to say that it may not be in some sense derivative of some other good, as long as it is also the case that a complete specification of that other good makes essential reference to political equality. See (Viehoff 2017).

⁹ I take this aspiration to be present, for instance, in both (Kolodny 2014a) and (Viehoff 2014). More generally, insofar as relational egalitarians are (at least in part) concerned with establishing democracy's authority, a mere baseline view will generally be inadequate, for reasons briefly discussed at the end of Section 4.

2.

The relational egalitarian account of political equality rests on the following line of thought:

- (1) *Relational Equality*: Certain kinds of egalitarian relationships have non-derivative value.
- (2) *Equal Power*: A (roughly) *equal* distribution of (some forms of) power among the parties is an *essential component* of such relationships.
- (3) *Political Relationships*: Our political community should instantiate relationships of this sort.
- (4) *Political Equality*: So (some forms of) power should be distributed equally among the citizens. Where it is, the institution has special value (*Democracy's Value*) and special authority (*Democracy's Authority*).

As it stands, this is evidently incomplete. In particular, even if (1), (2), and (3) are true, it does not yet follow that we should distribute political power equally because an equal distribution of power, though necessary, may not be sufficient for the instantiation of non-derivatively valuable egalitarian relationships. Under what conditions *Political Equality* does follow will depend on a more detailed account of egalitarian relationships and their instantiation conditions. I will briefly return to this toward the end of this chapter. But before I can get there, I need to discuss in more detail (1), (2), and (3).

Let me begin with *Relational Equality*. The starting point of the relational egalitarian approach is the observation that certain egalitarian relationships have non-derivative value. Thus Elizabeth Anderson has argued that egalitarians are fundamentally committed “to creat[ing] a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others.”¹⁰ According to Samuel Scheffler, “equality is an ideal governing certain kinds of interpersonal relationships,” and egalitarians should care about “the establishment of a society of equals, a society whose members relate to one another on a footing of equality.”¹¹ And the editors of a recent volume on relational (or, as they say, “social”) equality offer the following characterization of the position their book elucidates: “[E]quality is foremost about relationships between people. . . . When we appeal to the value of equality, we mean the value primarily of egalitarian and nonhierarchical relationships.”¹²

I am sympathetic to the thought that equality is a constitutive component of certain non-derivatively valuable relationships, and that societies in which the relevant form of equality is instantiated realize an ideal of which other societies, which do not instantiate it, fall short. But these claims, even if

¹⁰ (Anderson 1999), p. 289. ¹¹ (Scheffler 2015), p. 21.

¹² (Fourie, Schuppert et al. 2015), p. 1.

true, are open to significantly different interpretations. To see this, consider the two quite different sets of examples from which discussions of relational equality commonly start.

One case to which relational egalitarians regularly appeal to illustrate the ideal of relational equality is that of a *society not governed by social hierarchies* assigning positions of inferiority or superiority to different people. Thus David Miller invokes the ideal of a society “that is not marked by status divisions such that one can place different people in hierarchically ranked categories, in different classes for instance.”¹³ Niko Kolodny, when introducing the idea that “in virtue of how a society is structured, some people can be . . . ‘above’ and others ‘below,’” offers some paradigm cases of problematic social hierarchy: “The servant is ‘subordinate’ to the lord of the manor, the slave ‘subordinate’ to the master . . . The plebian is ‘lower than’ the patrician, the untouchable ‘lower than’ the Brahmin, and so on.”¹⁴ At their most extreme, such *caste societies* (as I will, for ease of reference, call societies that paradigmatically violate the ideal of equality Miller, Kolodny, and others are concerned with) assign a place in the hierarchy based on parentage or similar features beyond a person’s control.¹⁵ But caste societies, in the sense at issue here, may exist even where someone had control over the fate that led them to be assigned a lower rank on the social ladder. (Consider societies permitting peonage, in which people essentially discharge their debts by selling themselves into temporary slavery, and are viewed as equivalent to slaves while the peonage relation lasts.) The contrast to such a caste society is then a society that assigns equal social status to all citizens, and disallows inequalities that would be incompatible with it.

Another case often invoked by proponents of relational equality is a well-functioning *friendship* or similar relationship.¹⁶ Friendship and (at least more recently, and in some societies) marriage are commonly seen as quintessentially egalitarian relationships.¹⁷ We have a reasonably straightforward grasp of the ideal that friends should be one another’s equals, and we can think of a

¹³ (Miller 1997), p. 224.

¹⁴ (Kolodny 2014b), p. 292. See (Anderson 2012), p. 40, for a more detailed list of historically significant forms of social inequality.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Anderson refers to a specific prohibition on consigning people “to inferior office on the basis of identities or statuses imputed at birth” as “the anticaste principle.” (Anderson 2012), p. 106. I use the notion of a caste society in a more general fashion.

¹⁶ Friendship, marriage, etc. are discussed in some detail by (Scheffler 2015), Sect. 1.2, (Viehoff 2014), Part IV. Even those who do not discuss them in detail recognize these relationships as examples that fall within the general purview of relational equality. See, e.g., (Kolodny 2014b), p. 304.

¹⁷ For a thoughtful discussion of friendship’s egalitarian character (that does, however, overemphasize the significance of consensus among friends), see (Mansbridge 1980), pp. 8–14.

variety of ways in which a friendship may fall short of this ideal. Imagine, for instance, that one friend considers herself entitled to special treatment that her friend has no claim to (the friend owes it to her to be attentive, or grateful for her friendship, but she has no reciprocal duty to him), or asserts power over her friend that her friend lacks or that she denies to him (as when she insists that she gets to decide where they go on holiday together if she pays, or that she should pick their destination because she has better taste). Such a friendship, in which one friend effectively deems herself the other's superior (or inferior), would intuitively be deficient because it falls short of an ideal of how friends should relate to each other—specifically, as equals.

I think that relational egalitarian arguments for political equality must pay attention to differences between these two examples, and the associated intuitions underpinning *Relational Equality*, because they have quite different implications for *Equal Power* and *Political Relationships*. In a nutshell: If we start from the anti-caste intuition to defend relational egalitarianism, we have an easy time explaining why our findings apply to political relations in society at large. After all, caste is an essentially societal phenomenon. But we have a hard time explaining why relational equality requires equal power: unequal distributions of political power need not amount to objectionable social hierarchy of the sort we associate with caste or class structures. On the other hand, if we start from the example of friendship, we have a relatively easy time explaining the need for equal power. But we have a hard time establishing that the relevant norms apply to political society.

Let me conclude this section by contrasting the relational egalitarian arguments for political equality that are the focus of this chapter with other arguments with which they may easily be confused. On the relational egalitarian arguments I discuss, equal power is itself an essential component of a non-derivatively valuable relationship. By contrast, there are other arguments that also appeal to the non-derivative value of certain relationships (including, perhaps, relationships we tend to associate with equality), but grant at best indirect significance to equal power. Thus one might, with Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, greatly care about the relational (dis)value of dependence, and favor political equality because it inhibits dependence relations.¹⁸ Or one might, in line with neo-republican views, take non-domination to be the central value governing relationships among co-citizens, and argue that democracy contributes to its realization.¹⁹ It would be unsurprising if someone attracted to the ideal of relational equality also felt the pull of some of these other relational ideals. Indeed it is natural to think

¹⁸ Cf. (Neuhouser 2014).

¹⁹ (Pettit 2012).

that an ideal egalitarian relationship will instantiate not only the ideal of equality, but also other ideals of roughly the sort just gestured at. Yet the support for political equality that these other relational ideals provide is structurally sufficiently different, and subject to sufficiently distinct worries and objections, that this chapter will limit itself to discussing the more direct arguments for political equality that fit the schema outlined at the beginning of this section.

3.

This section discusses the *anti-caste paradigm* of relational equality. Behind this conception of relational equality lies the following thought: Caste societies, in which some people are socially “above” and others “below,” are intuitively morally problematic. There is something objectionable about a society that distinguishes between peasants and lords, plebeians and patricians, untouchables and Brahmins. And, relational egalitarians propose more specifically, what is objectionable about such arrangements are not merely their instrumental consequences, or the fact that those deemed “below” are treated in ways that are anyway problematic quite apart from the fact that others are “above,” or even that those who are below act in obsequious ways we find demeaning. Instead the social hierarchy is inherently problematic. Someone can say: “The social arrangements under which we live treat me as another’s social inferior, and him as my superior,” and that is meant to be an objection in its own right to these arrangements. Finally, for those who appeal to this conception of relational equality to defend political equality, inequality in power is (unless qualified in certain quite specific ways) itself constitutive of social hierarchy, rather than being merely a causal antecedent of certain hierarchical social relations.

To assess the plausibility of this position, this section discusses what precisely social hierarchy of the sort we associate with caste or class amounts to, and why such “social status hierarchy” (as I will call it) may be deemed distinctly problematic. Section 4 considers whether the absence of social status hierarchy requires an equal distribution of political power.

To determine what is morally problematic about social status hierarchies, we need to understand what they are. This is not, in the first instance, a moral inquiry but a conceptual one: an attempt to identify, and properly characterize, core features of a particular social phenomenon. Still, part of what seems to unify different instances of the phenomenon is that we view them as morally problematic; and we would expect this to matter for our analysis of the phenomenon’s central features. I treat as paradigmatic

instances of the phenomenon the kinds of caste or class²⁰ societies mentioned earlier: societies in which some are peasants and others lords, some untouchables and others Brahmins, some plebeians and others patricians. I focus on three characteristics of such societies: they involve *status* inequality; the inequality is not a matter of mere difference, but instead establishes a *hierarchy*; and the hierarchy structures *society as a whole*. Clarifying these characteristics should in turn help us identify what is distinctly morally problematic about paradigmatic instances of social status inequality.

i. Society as a Whole

Let me consider the last point first. The existence of a caste structure (like the existence of a class hierarchy, a patriarchal structure, etc.) is a feature of a society as a whole, rather than of a particular relationship. When we think, for instance, of the sense in which the servant is “below” the lord of the manor, we do *not* just mean that, *within their particular relationship*, the servant is subordinate. We also mean that their positions as master and servant *generalize*, and shape all other social relationships that they have. The servant, we may say, is not just his master’s servant. Even if he currently has no master, he remains *a servant*, and others will relate to him as such. Similarly, the master is not just his servant’s master. He will be *a master* even if he currently has no servants, and others will relate to him in what they think is a manner appropriate to his status.

A social hierarchy is properly attributable to society as a whole if it structures relationships among members of the society *in general*. The relevant notion of generality bears on both the *content* of social norms and the norms’ *existence conditions*. First, if you know that I am an untouchable in a caste society, you know not only how you should relate to me (in this regard), you also know the relation in which I stand to all other members of society, since that relation is itself determined by caste. Social status is, in Hohfeldian language, a “multital” relation (like property), not a “paucital” relation (like contract).²¹ (And like property, the social status associated with caste or class is insulated from certain forms of detailed attention to individual peculiarities. I will return to this point below.)

²⁰ So class, as it figures here, is centrally about social status. There are influential alternative notions of class, indebted to Marx or Weber, which focus instead on a person’s relation to the means of production, or capacity to generate income in the market. Class understood in these latter ways is evidently important in its own right. But the moral questions it raises are (at least in the first instance) distinct from relational-egalitarian concerns about inequality. For discussion, see (Turner 1988).

²¹ (Hohfeld 2001).

Second, for our society to be structured by a particular hierarchy, the norms governing relations among people with different status must have social reality: they must be “systematically sustained by laws, norms, or habits” that are sufficiently widespread to properly count as representative of society as a whole.²² We may call these “societal norms” for short. A full-blown account of social status hierarchy (which is beyond the scope of this chapter) would need to explain under what conditions norms are properly attributed to society as a whole, rather than reflecting the view of just a single person or a small sub-group. It would, in particular, have to explain how disagreement among members of a society about which norms properly govern it will affect the existence of societal norms, norms representative of society as a whole. Often the legal system will function as a mouthpiece for society’s view of norms. But not all social norms will be embodied in legal norms. And sometimes legal norms are in fact in tension with social norms; and it cannot be taken for granted that in such cases, the former prevail. (Think of the long struggle about caste in India after the official legal rejection of caste structures.)

Let me add three clarificatory observations. First, we need not assume that a society is governed by a single social status hierarchy. Instead societies are usually structured by various intersecting social status hierarchies: gender, race, class, and so on. To say that a social status relation governs society as a whole is thus *not* to say that it governs it *exclusively*.

Second, the features just highlighted are not unique to status *hierarchies*, but apply more generally to social differentiation that is attributable to society as a whole. Thus in a society that distinguishes between the status of child and the status of adult yet does not treat one as superior to the other, the fact that I am an adult structures all of my relations to everyone else *qua* child or fellow adult, and the norms involved are sustained by society. (The distinction between status differentiation and status hierarchy is discussed further below.)

Third, a society in the relevant sense is not limited to a group the size of a modern political community. For instance, a high school may be a “society” in the relevant sense, governed by internal norms that structure relations among all students and are sustained by the students’ attitudes and actions.²³ (This matters mostly because it expands the range of examples with which we can work to get a grip on the phenomenon in question.)

²² (Anderson 2012), p. 42.

²³ Perhaps a friendship too counts as a “society” so understood, and the demands of social status equality also apply to it *qua* small-scale society. This would, I think, be a feature rather than a bug. More importantly, it would not prevent us from also insisting that additional norms apply among friends *qua friends* (rather than *qua* fellow members of a small-scale society).

That caste or class is a feature of society as a whole in turn explains why not all instances of inequality amount to status hierarchy of the sort we associate with these phenomena. For example, that some people think of themselves as superior to others (and perhaps even that those particular others happen to think of themselves as inferior) is compatible with the absence of castes and classes if the claim to superiority is not sustained by societal norms. And even if it is recognized that one person has a special claim on another, and that claim is supported by societal norms, the asymmetry in claims need not amount to a hierarchy that mars society as a whole if the socially recognized relation is limited to the two parties, and does not structure their relations to many other people.²⁴

ii. Status

But even inequalities that are socially recognized, and structure relations among all members of society, need not create social hierarchies of the sort we associate with caste or class. To see this, consider the somewhat mundane, but also relatively tractable, example of a high school. The school *could* be structured by caste hierarchies: the jocks reign supreme, the geeks are somewhere near the bottom, and so on. But it need not be. And it need not be even if there are socially recognized inequalities that structure relations among all students.

Imagine, for instance, that each term the school publishes a complete ranking of all students' academic performance. So everyone knows where they are vis-à-vis anyone else when it comes to academic standing. And imagine too that there is a social norm in the school that students are expected to care about, and admire, academic success, and express that admiration toward those who do well. The social life of this high school, though it sustains inequality, need nonetheless not instantiate status hierarchies. Just imagine the relation between two students, one ranked close to the top of the class,

²⁴ Consider peonage. There is evidently something intrinsically bad about it: the person who is indebted must work for the other, without (at that moment) adequate compensation, and without significant control about whether to do such work. That alone likely suffices to make peonage objectionable, and deserving of abolition. It may also follow that the relation between debtor and creditor is one that is importantly unequal, unequal in a way that undermines certain relations between them. (Friends, for instance, would have to forgive another's debt for the friendship to be sustainable.) But as long as what has changed is *only* the debtor's relation to the creditor, and not the debtor's relation to others in society, peonage does not introduce the kind of status hierarchy with which we are currently concerned. The fact that historically, peonage was associated with social hierarchy reflects in part the fact that peonage existed in societies where those working for others in various positions were generally deemed to be of lower status. It is this further association that explains why peonage creates a distinctive problem of social hierarchy, of the sort we associate with caste or class.

the other close to the bottom. That one has performed better academically, and is thus worthy of admiration, and that such admiration ought to be expressed—the more successful student ought to be congratulated, say—does not, I think, justify the judgment that the higher-ranked student has *superior social status* in the school.²⁵

What distinguishes positive judgments, or even rankings, in general, and judgments of social hierarchy of the sort associated with superior or inferior status in particular? It is a central feature of status that it attributes to us a range of rights and duties that are one step removed from the characteristics on which the attribution of that status seems to rest. Think of the legal status of “minor”: It attributes to someone a whole range of legal incidents that are at least partly mediated by the very idea of “minor,” rather than directly justifiable by appeal to the characteristic that make us one (*viz.*, being below the age of majority). And this is not a feature of legal status alone. Sociologists concerned with social status also emphasize in their studies “the prestige accorded to individuals because of the abstract positions they occupy rather than because of immediately observable behavior.”²⁶ Even moral status may plausibly be thought to have this character.²⁷

Generalizing from these observations, I propose that status involves a gap between what triggers the attribution of a particular status to someone (their *quality*) and what response to the bearers of superior status is thought to be appropriate given that status (their *claim*). Status, in other words, is a non-eliminable intermediate step in the justification of its bearer’s claim, a step that makes the claim about something other than simply the underlying quality (age, behavior, performance).²⁸ This explains why we need not think of the high school as instantiating status inequality: while social norms require responding in certain ways to other students’ academic performance,

²⁵ This is not to say that the judgment that is being made is normally inert or irrelevant. A lower-ranked student may envy the higher-ranked student, or resent her for her success, and yet not take the other to be her social superior.

²⁶ (Gould 2002), p. 1147. See also, e.g., (Chan and Goldthorpe 2004), p. 383: Status order is “a set of hierarchical relations that express perceived and typically accepted social superiority, equality or inferiority of a quite generalised kind, attaching not to qualities of particular individuals but rather to social positions . . . or to certain . . . ascribed attitudes.” Note that some sociologists discussing status are ultimately interested in the micro-processes that determine how individuals evaluate others, and how various evaluations interact in establishing mutual (but not necessarily societal) rankings. See, e.g., (Jasso 2001). See (Turner 1988) for a general treatment of status in sociology and social theory.

²⁷ See, e.g., the discussion of “range properties” central to moral status in (Waldron 2002), and of “evaluative abstinence” and “opacity respect” in (Carter 2011).

²⁸ Cf. Kolodny’s discussion of “consideration,” or “those responses that social superiors, as social superiors, characteristically attract.” (Kolodny 2014b), p. 297. As Kolodny explains, “although their *basis* may be some narrow and accidental attribute of the person, the responses constitutive of consideration are *focused* on the person and his or her interests, claims, or imperatives as a whole.” (Kolodny 2014b), p. 298.

the link between that performance and the appropriate response is sufficiently close that we don't think of it as involving a more general judgment about the person that exceeds the specific quality at issue. (Matters would have been different if, for instance, the higher-ranked students had been entitled not to receive warm words, but to be obeyed, or to have their belongings carried around by their fellow students.)

iii. Hierarchy

That status comes with a whole bundle of rights and duties in turn explains why it is worth distinguishing clearly between status *differences* and status *hierarchy*. Adults and children do not have the same legal status. Nor do married people and single people. And yet we would not ordinarily think that with regard to these examples, one group's legal status is superior to the other's. Their status differences—the different rights and duties they have qua minors or adults, or qua married or single people—do not involve claims that we associate with one party's superiority over the other. There is a status difference here, but no status hierarchy. Or, to use terminology sometimes adopted by sociologists, there is “differentiation” but no “stratification” of status. And it is status hierarchy or stratification—or, as I will usually continue to call it, “status inequality”—that really concerns us.

How do we distinguish between social status inequality and a mere difference in social status? It is tempting to adopt what I will call the *simple approach* here: A is B's social superior, and their relation is thus one of status inequality, if the relevant societal norms specifically assign A greater benefits than they assign to B, or grant her greater rights, or give her greater power. Let me say, for short, that the norms assign “advantages” to A over B.²⁹ On this view, I can identify someone as my social superior by identifying how our society's norms distribute advantages between us.

But the simple approach, though tempting, is ultimately inadequate. For part of our aspiration in developing an account of social status hierarchy is to make sense of the complaint someone has when he says, “The social arrangements under which we live treat me as another's social inferior, and him as my superior,” where this is an objection in its own right to these arrangements. The sense in which society treats another as my superior (or inferior) must, in other words, be inherently morally problematic. And

²⁹ How do “advantages” relate to Kolodny's “consideration”? If “consideration” is meant to pick out responses to superiors that are not inherently problematic, then “consideration” and “advantage” may come to the same thing; but then Kolodny still needs to explain which form of consideration is morally objectionable. If “consideration” is meant to pick out responses that are inherently morally problematic, then some of the phenomena that Kolodny is interested in do not amount to “consideration.”

yet the features highlighted up to now—that society as a whole assigns certain unequal advantages to A over B, in a way that seems justificatorily detached from underlying considerations—are not, jointly or alone, inherently problematic.

Consider the following example:

Medical Services: A society grants certain people (medical doctors on duty) a right to park their car in spots where others are not permitted to park. It also gives them flashlights that they can attach to their cars, and when they turn them on, others are expected to scramble out of the way and let the doctor pass.

In some ways—and, crucially, with regard to those features our analysis of social status inequality has focused on up to now—this case is difficult to distinguish from another.

Lord's Carriage: A society grants certain people (Lords) the right to park their carriage in places where others are not permitted to park. It also gives Lords certain insignia, and if those are attached to the Lord's carriage, others (commoners) are expected to scramble out of the way and let the Lord's carriage pass.

On the simple view, the special advantages that doctors have in *Medical Services* would establish them as our social superiors, just like the Lord in *Lord's Carriage*. But intuitively it is quite clear that, though the doctor's advantages *could* be that, they *need not* amount to superior social status (which, remember, is meant to be inherently objectionable). For these advantages, despite their unequal distribution, can also intuitively be compatible with mere social differentiation.

Whether the doctors' advantages amount to differentiation or hierarchy depends, I propose, on *how they are justified*. And since what matters are the norms attributable to society, it depends, more specifically, on *how society takes the advantages to be justified*. (For the sake of simplicity, I will generally continue to speak of justification simpliciter. It is worth keeping in mind that the issue is the justification as viewed by society, or *social justification*.) If the societal norms granting doctors such advantages are justified by appeal to the interests of everyone around here, where all of these interests are treated as equally significant, then possession of these advantages does not translate into social superiority. I would not, in that case, look at a doctor who races past me in her car with her flashlight on and think "Society treats her as my social superior," the way that a peasant may have looked at the lord of the manor as he passes by in his carriage. And when I see the doctor later at a bar, I wouldn't normally fear that she would take herself to be my social superior and decline to talk to me. (She might still do so. But if

she does, this reflects her personal views rather than society's judgment of our respective status.)

If, by contrast, doctors are given such advantages, not because society believes them to be suitably instrumentally justified in light of everyone's equally relevant interests, but because doctors are deemed to have more important interests or claims—to be ultimately more important than we are—then their advantages *do* amount to social hierarchy rather than mere differentiation. (Similarly, if society takes these advantages to be justified instrumentally, but the instrumental justification itself rests on assumptions about the differential moral importance of different persons, then the advantages mark, though they may not constitute, social status hierarchy.)

With this conceptual analysis of social status hierarchy in place, we can turn to the normative question why such hierarchy is inherently morally problematic. The distinction just drawn, between status hierarchy and status differentiation, suggests an initial answer: If we are all moral equals, matter equally, etc., then social status hierarchy is objectionable *because it treats us as if we were not*. The distribution of advantages associated with social status hierarchy lacks adequate *social* justification.

The emphasis on *social* in the previous sentence is important if the analysis of social status hierarchy is to capture the distinctiveness of the relational egalitarian complaint. After all, if the issue were simply that some people are given objectively unjustified advantages to the detriment of others, then this complaint could easily be accommodated by conceptions of equality in contradistinction to which relational egalitarian positions have usually been developed.³⁰ What makes the complaint at issue here distinctive is its concern with social status hierarchy as a *social fact*: at issue is not simply whether an unequal distribution is *objectively* justified, but whether it can be justified from within the normative commitments of society at large without presupposing that some people (some people's interests or claims) are of greater ultimate moral significance than others (their interests or claims).³¹ The attribution of social status hierarchy to a society is thus an interpretive exercise that requires judgments about the normative basis on which society endorses particular social norms, most obviously norms that distribute unequally certain advantages. Where, on the best interpretation

³⁰ See, e.g., (Anderson 1999, 2012).

³¹ It is compatible with this account that social status inequality exists even though an objective egalitarian justification for the distribution of advantages is in principle available, if that justification is not recognized, or indeed recognizable, by the citizens. So a concern with social status inequality, as a phenomenon that depends on people's views of how inequalities are justified, may provide support for theories that care about whether justifications of social or political arrangements are accessible to, or endorsed by, those they govern.

available to those living under these norms, society's endorsement of these norms cannot rest on normative and factual premises that treat everyone's interests or claims as of fundamental equal importance, these norms embody society's implicit (and sometimes explicit) judgment that some people matter more than others. Social status hierarchies, we may say, *embody* society's judgment that some people are *fundamentally more important* than others; and they exist—as a *social fact*—where those living in a society cannot reasonably see how the unequal distribution of advantages could be given a social justification compatible with everyone's equal fundamental moral significance.³² This may have various detrimental effects on our capacity to engage in egalitarian relationships across class- or caste-lines, or on our self-respect. But it is, crucially, also inherently objectionable: it is a morally deplorable feature of a society that its norms embody mistaken judgments of fundamental inequality even if this has no further effect on people's attitudes and relationships.

4.

Section 3 offered a reconstruction of social status hierarchy and its moral significance. In this section I want to explore what social status hierarchy, so understood, entails for our assessment of political equality. Specifically, I argue that, once social status hierarchy is properly understood, it becomes difficult to defend the ideal of political equality by appeal to the anti-caste intuition. If the previous account of social status hierarchy is correct, there need be no complaint *based on status hierarchies* just because some people have certain advantages or superior entitlements, including greater power. For as long as society justifies these inequalities in a way that does not treat one person (or her fundamental interests and claims) as more important than another, the inequalities are compatible with our status as social equals. And because

³² There is thus an expressive dimension to social inequality, if by this we mean that such inequality matters centrally because it is reasonably taken to reflect a certain view of people's fundamental moral significance. The expressive dimension in turn affects—constitutively—the possibility of certain kinds of relationships, relationships in which people see each other as equals. For views that emphasize the expressive dimension of status inequality, see (Fourie 2012) and (Scanlon 2003). But unlike Scanlon (and perhaps Fourie), I think that what is required for problematic status inequalities is neither that certain inequalities “could only be understood as *intended* to express the view that they were inferior” ((Scanlon 2003), p. 213, my emphasis) nor that certain inequalities, though lacking “the aim of *expressing* inferiority, nonetheless had the effect of *giving rise to feelings of inferiority* on the part of most reasonable citizens” (p. 213, second emphasis added). It suffices that the inequality, though *not intended* to express any view, in fact is reasonably taken to express such a view; and when it does, this constitutively undermines certain valuable relationships, even if no one *in fact* feels inferior as a result.

the distribution of political power has significant instrumental effects on many people other than the power-holder, it is often possible to explain, quite straightforwardly, the benefit of an unequal distribution of power without appealing to the superior importance of one person's interests or claims.

To make this suggestion both more concrete and more plausible, consider an example of unequal political power that, it seems to me, fits this description.

Necessary Representation: An egalitarian tribe, one in which all adults are generally assumed to have equal status, comes into conflict with another tribe about shared hunting grounds. Some agreement needs to be negotiated. The difficulty is, however, that both tribes are nomadic, which makes it difficult to send an emissary. So when one person (call her R) happens to come upon a member of the other tribe, they take the opportunity to negotiate a wide-ranging set of rules for hunting that will minimize future conflict. Then each of them returns home to their own tribe and presents them with the agreement reached. R delivers the rules to her tribe, and the tribe expects all of its members to abide by them—not because R was authorized in advance to make the decision, or because a majority of the tribe's members agree with the rules, but because, given the importance of having rules that coordinate interactions with the other tribe, and the difficulty of negotiating with the other tribe, following R's rules is the best way to solve the urgent moral problem posed by the inter-tribal conflict.

I think there is no doubt that R has greater political power here than any other member of the tribe: she decided what rules would bind all of them with regard to hunting in a certain area. And yet I also think that she need not therefore be deemed their social superior. In other words: whatever complaint R's fellow citizens may have about this arrangement empowering R (and I do not deny that they could have justified complaints), their complaint cannot reasonably be that, if R is so empowered, then R is granted superior social status. This remains true, it is worth adding, even if the agreement will be binding for many years into the future, and so R's decision will affect how the tribe will live for a long time to come (because, say, a suitable encounter with a member of the other tribe is sufficiently uncommon). And I think it is also true even if, as the example assumes, the negotiations cover a wide range of issues, touching on many features of tribal life.

This example provides intuitive support for the claim that not all inequalities in power amount to social status hierarchy. Furthermore, it fits with the explanation I offered for why inequalities in advantages (including inequalities in power) need not undermine equality of social status. Whether they do depends precisely on why society grants someone special advantages, including greater power. And given what I said in setting up the example, we here have an explanation of R's superior political power

that does not depend on any assumption that she is, or is thought by the other members of the tribe to be, their social superior—as someone who somehow matters more than they do.

Let me emphasize here the particular dialectic of the argument: my claim is *not* that there is nothing problematic about R's unequal power. My claim is, rather, that whatever we think is problematic about it (if anything), it cannot be that R, by dint of her greater power, has become her fellow tribe-members' social superior, since that claim is false. So if we are not willing to give up the thought that R's greater power is objectionable, or at least regrettable, then we need to look elsewhere for a justification of that judgment.

In light of these observations, let me discuss in more detail Niko Kolodny's defense of political equality based on relational egalitarian concerns.³³ Kolodny's paradigmatic examples of relational inequality include, as I mentioned earlier, servant/lord of the manor, slave/master, plebeian/patrician, and untouchable/Brahmin. In other words, he is centrally (though perhaps not exclusively) concerned with what I have called social status inequality.³⁴ Kolodny also argues that such inequality is instantiated, in a fairly obvious way, where society gives some people greater power or *de facto* authority than others. Even if the society otherwise shows equal concern for people's interests, and for their claims to means that enable the pursuit of their personal life plans, it is nonetheless a presumptively unequal society if (i) some have "greater relative *power* (whether formal or legal, or otherwise) over others, while not being resolutely disposed to refrain from exercising that greater power as something to which those others are entitled"; or (ii) some have "greater relative *de facto authority* (whether formal or legal, or otherwise) over others, in the sense that their commands or requests are generally, if not exceptionlessly, complied with (though not necessarily for any moral reasons)" and they lack (once again) the right disposition to refrain

³³ Elizabeth Anderson, the other prominent relational egalitarian proponent of democracy, is not open to the worry I raise here, at least on one reading of her argument. On that reading, Anderson's relational argument for democracy is quite indirect: Democracy is not required by relational equality as such. Rather, relational equality requires that public officials act for public ends, public ends are determined by the public interest, and people should be given a democratic say in determining what the public interest requires if we are to make sure that everyone's interests are to count equally. See (Anderson 2010), p. 107. (On another interpretation, Anderson relies on a story about delegation not dissimilar to Kolodny's, and assumes that the public ends whose pursuit is compatible with relational equality must—as a conceptual matter—be set by the people themselves. This account would be subject to worries similar to the ones discussed here.)

³⁴ Niko Kolodny has suggested to me that he may have had in mind something closer to a view on which relations of inequality—including asymmetries of power and authority—are problematic in general, independently of specific relationships and their value. But for reasons I briefly discuss in Section 7, I think this is a rather less plausible position than the one I discuss here.

from exercising that authority.³⁵ So for Kolodny, inequality of power or de facto authority as such poses a (presumptive) problem for our social status equality.

Kolodny is clear that not all social relations that assign differential power to people give rise to worries about status inequality. He recognizes, for instance, that many private associations—churches, employment relations, families—involve unequal power and may yet avoid worries about relational inequality. But he thinks he has a straightforward explanation for the special objection we have to an unequal distribution of political power: Private relations usually include exit options, or other opportunities to avoid standing in the unequal power relation.³⁶ As a result, it is within our power to determine whether others have unequal power over us; and that itself reduces the impact that the inequality has on our relationships. Political power, by contrast, usually arises in relations that lack significant exit options or other opportunities to avoid being under another's power.

I agree that the presence of exit options does indeed explain why we are often (though not always) much less concerned with inequalities of power within certain private relations. But though correct, the appeal to exit options is insufficient to deal with *Necessary Representation*: just as in any other political community, membership in the tribe is not easily given up, and so the unequal power of the tribal emissary R cannot be compensated for by other members' opportunity to avoid being bound by the outcome of her negotiations.

The distinction between private and political decisions is not the only resource Kolodny deploys to explain why sometimes we are relatively unconcerned with unequal power. He also suggests that unequal power is unproblematic where the person who has greater power is merely the *agent* of those over whom the power is exercised.³⁷ This explains, Kolodny suggests, why political representation need not pose a threat to our equal social status: our representatives (and, by extension, someone like R in my example) may have more power or de facto authority than we do. But they are nonetheless not our superiors because they have and exercise this power qua agents of the people, who have merely *delegated* decision-making power to the office holder.

³⁵ (Kolodny 2014b), p. 295. Kolodny also mentions, as a third possibility, someone's having "attributes (for example, race, lineage, wealth, perceived divine favor) that generally attract greater *consideration* than the corresponding attributes of others" (p. 296). I think consideration is indeed more closely tied to issues of caste inequality. But as we just saw, unequal consideration amounts to caste inequality only if it lacks a suitable social justification. In light of this, and because Kolodny himself is content to forgo appeals to consideration, and reach democratic conclusions via appeals to the significance of unequal power or de facto authority (p. 298), I set aside this third possibility.

³⁶ (Kolodny 2014), p. 304.

³⁷ (Kolodny 2014b), p. 317.

I agree that there need be no problem of social status inequality between citizens and their representatives. Speaking purely anecdotally, many years ago I used to know my local MP reasonably well. And though I knew that he had power that I lacked, I never thought that he was my social superior.³⁸ But is this best explained by the fact that the MP was my (or, rather, my community's) agent?

It depends on what the agency relation amounts to. On one understanding of what delegation amounts to, it may require that the principal has substantive control over the agent. I doubt, however, that this is strictly necessary to explain why my MP's greater power did not make him my social superior. For it is highly doubtful that citizens do have substantive control over their MPs. Clearly individual citizens lack such control. And I in fact doubt that even the community as a whole possesses it. (Just consider the significant divergence between a representative's voting patterns and her constituents' preferences that is common in many democracies.) One response to this would simply be that our democracies fall short of the ideal of delegation, and thus also of realizing social equality between MPs and ordinary citizens. But I don't think this is adequate. For I accept (non-idiosyncratically, I believe) both that my local MP was subject to neither my control nor the control of the community, *and* that he was nonetheless not my social superior.

On another view, the central feature of delegated power is precisely that it is not justified by, and exercised for the sake of, the interests of the power-holding agent, but by, and for, the interests of the principal. Power may thus count as delegated even if the principal has no control over the agent. (In practice it may, however, often make sense to introduce such control precisely to ensure that the agent acts for the principal's benefit.) This, I think, offers a more plausible account of why my MP is not my social superior. But it also entails that what creates conditions of social inferiority and superiority is not possession of unequal power or de facto authority as such. Rather, whether unequal power constitutes relations of social inferiority or superiority depends on what justifies this inequality.

I thus suggest that relational egalitarian arguments that start from a concern with caste or class hierarchies do not provide reasons for valuing political equality *as such*. This follows from the fact that the distribution of power or de facto authority as such is not an independent constituent of unequal status relations of the sort we associate with caste and class. Instead political equality is, on the anti-caste view, nothing more than a *baseline*: If society's

³⁸ I leave it again open whether there may be other complaints about our MPs' greater power. My sole point here is that, whatever complaints we have about representative institutions, we cannot plausibly complain that the correlative inequalities in power constitute relations of social status hierarchy.

justification for distributing political power unequally does not rest on an appeal to the equal interests or claims of the community's members, then the unequal distribution gives rise to complaints about social status inequality. But if society's justification for the inegalitarian distribution of power takes every member to be of equal significance, then political inequality is not even regrettable insofar as our concern is solely with social status hierarchy.

Let me conclude this section with two brief observations about the implications of this argument for *Democracy's Value* (the claim that democratic institutions have special value) and *Democracy's Authority* (the claim that they have special authority) respectively. When it comes to *Democracy's Value*, the fact that the anti-caste argument only establishes equal power as a baseline (rather than vindicate it as an ideal) may, on some views, be of greater theoretical than practical significance. For whether an inegalitarian distribution of power is compatible with social status equality depends on whether an adequate social justification of such inequality is available. And whether it is available depends on the conditions under which particular justifications can be attributed to society as a whole, a matter about which I have said very little. Thus someone may respond to the argument offered here by suggesting that a justification can be attributed to society only if there is a high degree of consensus among citizens (or reasonable citizens, or...) regarding its content; and that there is no such consensus when it comes to the purported egalitarian benefits of an inegalitarian distribution of power.³⁹ But then it might turn out that the anti-caste argument is sufficient, in practice, to establish democracy's distinctive egalitarian value. I in fact believe that the conditions under which we can plausibly attribute a particular justification to society are (in some ways) less demanding, so that it is rather easier for a society to satisfy the requirements of social status equality while distributing political power unequally. But since I cannot solve this matter here, I simply flag its importance.

And in any case, even on the most generous interpretation of the conditions under which we attribute a justification to society, the anti-caste argument cannot establish *Democracy's Authority*. Kolodny suggests that, "If I were to disregard the democratic decision, then I would be depriving others of equal opportunity to influence this very decision. For influence over the decision, in the sense relevant in this context, is not simply influence over what gets engraved on tablets or printed in registers; it is influence over what is actually done. Insofar as relations of social equality are partly constituted by precisely that equal opportunity for influence, I would be, by depriving

³⁹ This suggestion is evidently modelled on Estlund's argument briefly mentioned in Section 2.

others of that influence, relating to them as a social superior, at least in that instance.”⁴⁰

But if equal power (or “equal opportunity for influence”) is not a constituent component of equal social status, then this argument runs into trouble.⁴¹ Unequal power may be compatible with social equality if it is suitably justified. If one thinks that acting contrary to unjust legal demands is an adequate justification for claiming special power, then justified resistance or disobedience need not give rise to a complaint about social status inequality. If I thought I could disobey because I was special, superior to my fellow citizens, then there would indeed be a problem. But if I thought instead that anyone who found himself in my situation—anyone confronted with this unjust law, and able to disobey—would have reason, and permission, to act as I do, then I would not be taking myself to be anyone’s social superior, and my disobedience would not have to be incompatible with our equal social status.

5.

Let me turn next to the *friendship conception* of relational equality, which takes as its starting point paradigmatically egalitarian relationships like friendship or marriage. Though perhaps not wholly independent of the anti-caste version of relational equality, it is clearly not neatly aligned with it. There is no neat alignment, because in a society that is deeply structured by social hierarchies like caste, people are capable of having egalitarian friendships or marriages, if not across caste- or class-lines, then at least with people who share their status. (Two servants can realize an ideal of egalitarian friendship among themselves even though they are both “below” their master.) But neither is there complete independence, because in a society governed by class hierarchies it is difficult for a master and a servant to have a friendship among equals. Even if they both try as hard as they can to ignore the inegalitarian norms, the fact that these norms are socially enforced will make it difficult to escape the societally imposed inequalities, and avoid having them foisted upon their own interpersonal relationship.⁴²

The following discussion of the friendship conception of relational equality will focus on two points in particular. First, equal power is, I think, a constituent

⁴⁰ (Kolodny 2014b), p. 315.

⁴¹ I set aside here the further problem that my disobedience need not be authorized by any norm attributable to society, which would seem a precondition for social status hierarchy.

⁴² Indeed, some sociologists use density of friendship relations as an indicator of class structure (understood in the sense discussed in Section 3): (Chan and Goldthorpe 2004).

component of egalitarian friendship. Thus an appeal to this conception of relational equality will avoid many of the problems we encountered in the previous sections. But, second, we must ask whether the ideal of friendship can plausibly be thought to govern our political relations—or, rather, which features of friendship are essential for triggering the demand for equal power, and whether these features plausibly have a counterpart in the political domain.

Consider a friendship, marriage, or similar relationship. I assume that participants in such relationships have special concern for one another, and thus take the other person's interests to make demands on them that are greater than those made by the interests of outsiders. But *special* concern is not enough for friendship. There must also be a commitment to *equal* concern. Friends take the demands made by their friends' interests to be symmetrical to those that their own interests make on their friends.⁴³ More specifically, they each accept in principle that "the other person's equally important interests . . . should play an equally significant role in influencing decisions made within the context of the relationship" *and* they each have "a normally effective disposition to treat the other's interests accordingly" in their deliberation, "constraining [their] decisions and influencing what [they] will do."⁴⁴

But even special concern and equal concern together do not exhaust our ideal of friendship. There is also a requirement of equal power over the relationship. And this requirement is not a mere by-product, but a constituent component of our egalitarian ideal of friendship. Friends should have equal power—understood as equal opportunity for influence—over the character of their relationship and the norms governing it; and failure to distribute power over the relationship equally means that the relationship falls short of its egalitarian ideal.

Consider an example: Imagine spouses who each accept that the other's interests are as important as their own in determining how they should relate to each other, and who each have the disposition to act accordingly. Nonetheless they may end up disagreeing about the character and norms of their relationship, or how they should interact or act together. They may disagree because equal concern underdetermines what they should do; or because they differ as to what equal concern exactly requires, whether because they diverge on what interests properly count as part of their marriage, or because they disagree about how weighty various interests are. To make the

⁴³ I don't want to exclude the possibility that there may be other relationships that give rise to special obligations and yet lack that symmetrical character. But these would not be relationships of friendship, and would lack the distinctive value that friendships have.

⁴⁴ (Scheffler 2015), p. 25.

example more concrete: Spouses in an egalitarian marriage may disagree about whether they owe it to their neighbor to invite her to a party they are holding, even though they both would be happier if the neighbor didn't come. (So their interests are aligned, but their judgments about what to do in light of these interests are not.) If one of them unilaterally goes ahead and invites the neighbor even though he knows that his spouse thinks they ought not to, then this is, I think, a presumptive problem for their relationship. As a one-off event, it may be relatively minor: what ultimately matters is equal power over the relationship as a whole, rather than any one-off decision.⁴⁵ So if there will be future opportunities for the other spouse to decide how they proceed in the face of disagreement, the current decision to issue an invitation unilaterally may not seem especially problematic. But if something like this happens frequently, and isn't balanced across the parties to the relationship, then it would, it seems to me, threaten their egalitarian relationship, simply because the person extending the invitation exercises (and, in recognizing that he does, implicitly asserts a right to) unequal power over the relationship. (Similarly, if the decision at issue, though one-off, is sufficiently important to seriously change the shape of the relationship, and if the other party foreseeably won't have an opportunity to equally shape the relationship in the future, then there is a problem.)

Someone might accept the example but insist that it does not show that equal power plays the particular role in our ideal of friendship that I have proposed. I will consider two versions of this response. First, someone might argue that friendship requires *consensus* among the friends about the character of their relationship and the norms governing it.⁴⁶ The problem with the example mentioned is not that one partner exercises unequal power by issuing the invitation; it is, rather, that the spouses do not agree on how to proceed as a couple. (So in a sense, equal power over the relationship is important. But this is only because friends must agree, and so may be thought to have—equal—veto power over actions undertaken qua friends. What ultimately matters is that the parties reach a consensus, not that they have equal power.)

⁴⁵ Not all forms of power are equally problematic from the perspective of friendship. Persuading me of the wisdom of a course of action, though it involves a form of power, does not pose the same problem as authoritative directives, threats, or even offers. Why? For friends to relate to each other as friends, they must see each other *and themselves* as possessing certain agential capacities. Among these is the capacity to appropriately respond to reasons central to the friendship, including reasons about how best to understand its character and norms. So a friend (qua friend) should properly treat her rational convictions regarding the proper character of the friendship as her own, rather than attribute them to another, even if that other played a role in bringing the conviction about by rational argument.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., (Mansbridge 1980), pp. 9–10.

But this seems to me to be a mistaken view of friendship. As friends, we do have reason to coordinate, or settle, on a common understanding of the norms governing our relationship. This partly reflects the instrumental value of shared norms, and partly the importance of reciprocity (and perhaps especially reciprocity visible to the parties) in relationships among friends. But such coordination can be achieved not just by consensus, but also by taking turns in deciding contested decisions, deferring to an impartial third party, or adopting some other egalitarian decision procedure that we accept as binding. If my spouse and I disagree about certain important matters—how to treat our neighbor, raise our kids, etc.—then this might put a strain on us because we might find ourselves torn between the demands of the relationship and the duties we have to others (the neighbor, our children, etc.). But this does not make the relationship any less successful *qua friendship or marriage* than it would be if we had simply been in agreement about these matters.⁴⁷

Second, someone might agree that the distribution and exercise of power matters in a friendship (and not just because friendship is committed to consensus), but suggest that the real problem with, say, unilaterally issuing an invitation to the neighbor is that it amounts to making use of an *arbitrary* power advantage to settle how the couple will proceed in the face of disagreement. What makes these power advantages arbitrary is that they are *unjustified*: there is no good reason why the partner who prefers extending the invitation should be able to settle the matter the way he did. More generally, one may think that friendship is incompatible with unjustified power advantages, but not with justified ones—and so equal power is, even in relations among friends, a baseline but not an ideal in its own right. But then the friendship conception of relational equality would fare no better than the social status conception when it comes to vindicating the ideal of political equality.

Yet this view too seems to me mistaken, because even (otherwise) justified power advantages may be problematic from the point of view of egalitarian friendship. One way to see this is to recognize that, in the examples mentioned, the party's use of power need not be unjustified—except insofar as there is a distinct requirement of equal power. For if it were indeed morally wrong not to invite the neighbor, and the spouse extends the invitation because he recognizes this, then it would seem that he has a justification for doing what he did. Now perhaps the thought is that, though his *use* of the power was

⁴⁷ This is compatible with recognizing that certain kinds of disagreements may make our relationship impossible: if we disagree so deeply that we cannot even *see* each other's actions and attitudes as governed by a commitment to equal concern, say, then this will make it difficult for us to sustain our relationship over time.

justified, the fact that he *had* the power was not. But what could explain that his possession of the power was unjustified except that, in possessing the power, he was able to bypass his partner's disagreement and thus exercise unequal power over the relationship? I don't see any plausible answer, and thus conclude that our assessment of the situation does presuppose a genuine commitment to equal power among the spouses, not just as a baseline, but as a requirement in its own right.

Another way of making this point is to highlight cases where an unequal distribution of power is perhaps even more obviously justified. If one partner is much more reliable in judging what course of action would be best, but usually cannot persuade the other within the time frame in which a decision has to be made, then an instrumental concern with outcomes would reasonably justify empowering the more reliable partner to make decisions when the conditions just sketched are met. And even if this includes pretty much all of the relevant decisions that have to be made together, on a mere baseline view this would not be regrettable. Yet I think a friendship that would have this shape would be decidedly lopsided, and *worse as a friendship*. This is so even if, all things considered, the instrumental benefits of the unequal distribution would make up for the resulting loss in the value of the relationship. In other words, even if the reasons for political equality are defeated by the reasons against, the inegalitarian distribution of power is regrettable—and so equal power is an ideal in its own right, rather than a mere baseline.

6.

I take away from Section 5 that friendship and similar relationships involve a genuine commitment to an ideal of equal power: friends ideally have (roughly) equal opportunity to influence the character of their relationship and the norms governing it. Thus relational egalitarian arguments that start from the intrinsic good of friendship, rather than the paradigmatic evil of caste or class societies, can relatively straightforwardly vindicate an ideal of equal power in certain relationships. They face, however, a distinctive challenge: they must explain how the ideal of friendship can plausibly be extended beyond the relatively small, face-to-face relationships in which it is usually at home, to cover a much larger political community of the sort governed by modern democratic institutions. How do we justify applying the demands of friendship to an entire polity?

One strategy would be to accept that the requirement of equal power applies, in the first instance, to small-scale interpersonal relationships; but to then argue that the laws that govern our community at large themselves

shape how we may relate to friends and spouses.⁴⁸ Yet this strategy runs into trouble. Consider, for instance, an arrangement that denies voting rights to everyone who fails to pass a political knowledge test. Even if half the population were disenfranchised as a result, the actual power each remaining voter has over the laws governing the community would be minuscule. So if our concern were with how much power two friends have over their relationship, the fact that one of them is enfranchised and the other is not would be of limited importance: there are many sources of differential power among friends, and differential enfranchisement would have much less impact on the overall power balance than many other social inequalities that friends can regularly tolerate.

So the friendship conception of relational equality can plausibly vindicate the ideal of political equality only if political relations are themselves governed by (something very much like) the norms we ordinarily associate with friendship. And this may be doubted. There are a number of features that may seem to clearly set apart friendship (and similar relationships) from relations we have (and indeed could have) with our fellow citizens in a political community. To assess the force of this concern, the following discussion asks whether any of the features that most plausibly set apart friendship from political relations centrally bear on whether requirements of equal power apply among friends.

What may most obviously distinguish paradigmatic cases of friendship from political relations are the size of the group and the kind of interaction the members engage in. Friendship commonly involves face-to-face interactions (or their mediated counterparts: phone conversations, letters...) and is (partly for that reason) limited to groups of a manageable size. By contrast, what we think of as political relations arise commonly among groups the membership of which is many magnitudes larger than even large-ish groups of friends; and consequently there couldn't be face-to-face interaction among all, or even a significant portion, of the polity's members.

But although size and face-to-face interactions are important for understanding central aspects of friendship, these features do not seem crucial for understanding the applicability of egalitarian demands of equal power. If groups grow too large to allow for regular face-to-face interaction, this changes the character of the relationship in important ways: the idea that a certain form of emotional intimacy, or certain kinds of interactions that presuppose face-to-face encounters, are central to the group's character must be abandoned. But other important features could survive: members of the group may continue to take themselves to have special obligations to each other, to be specially committed to each other in particular ways, and so on. And, crucially,

⁴⁸ Cf. (Viehoff 2014), p. 363.

I see no reason for thinking that the mere loss of face-to-face interaction, and the mere increase in size beyond what we associate with standard cases of friendship, would undermine the members' sense that they should have an equal opportunity to shape the character of the relationship and the norms governing it.

Another crucial feature of friendship is its distinctively non-instrumental value, and the fact that those party to it must value it—and each other—in a correspondingly non-instrumental fashion.⁴⁹ This is not to deny that friendship also has instrumental value. (When I am in trouble I may find it instrumentally beneficial to have friends rather than be friendless.) Still, there is an important sense in which the instrumental value cannot be too central to it: On a plausible view, the special obligations we have to friends depend on the special value of our relationship, and the special value of our relationship depends on our valuing the relationship, and each other, appropriately—which means, crucially, not just (or even primarily) as instrumentally beneficial.

By contrast, it may be suggested, political relations are centrally instrumental in orientation: we make decisions as part of a political community because we need to solve certain problems together. Political relations may, for instance, be necessary for doing justice: without forms of collective action that are made possible by large-scale authoritative decision-making, we couldn't discharge moral obligations that we owe to one another. And the instrumental value of political relations is largely independent of the attitudes we take toward them.

Yet this attempt to distinguish friendship from political relations overstates their differences. Most importantly, even if political relations have instrumental value because they enable us to realize justice among us, and we would have political obligations on purely instrumental grounds, it may *also* be true that political relations have additional non-instrumental value (and citizens corresponding obligations) under the right conditions. And among these conditions may be that the citizens suitably value one another, and their relationship, non-instrumentally.

A more plausible objection to the friendship conception emphasizes not the difference between instrumental and non-instrumental value, but rather that friendship is optional in an important sense, while political relationships are mandatory, because required for the realization of justice. Correlatively, one might think, what our political relationships should look like is significantly constrained by considerations of justice; by contrast, the character of a friendship, though subject to some external moral norms, is importantly

⁴⁹ For an influential articulation of this line of thought, see (Scheffler 1997).

underdetermined by such norms, and it is up to those who are party to the friendship to fill in the picture.

More specifically, obligations among friends depend in part on the actual reciprocal expectations of the parties, in part on what their past interactions have made reasonable to expect of each other; and so these obligations can be shaped, intentionally and unintentionally, by the parties. This malleability, one might think, in turn explains the importance of equal power over our friendship: Part of what it is to be friends is to *create the friendship together*, by shaping its character and the norms governing it. If this is central to friendship, then a commitment to relating to one another as equals requires giving parties an equal opportunity to shape the relationship *together as equals*—and so we can explain the requirement of equal power among friends.⁵⁰

But does this fundamentally distinguish friendship from political relations? Even if our political relations are mandated, and significantly constrained, by antecedent moral duties (including, centrally, duties of justice), these moral duties underdetermine what our political and social arrangements ought to look like. So the norms governing our political life are also malleable in important ways: different political relationships may differ in character, and in the norms that govern relations among co-citizens. And that there are limits to such malleability, set by considerations of justice, does not fundamentally distinguish political relations from friendships, which are similarly constrained by moral requirements.

Given the discussion up to now, I do not see why it should *in principle* be impossible to extend the relational egalitarian ideal with which we are familiar

⁵⁰ We must distinguish this account of equal power from another view for which it may be mistaken: the view that we each have a personal autonomy interest in shaping our own lives, and thus also in shaping our relationships; and that, in light of our commitment to equal concern, we would also try to advance those interests equally within the relationship, by giving people equal power over it. Elsewhere I have expressed misgivings about such an argument (Viehoff 2017). But my concern here is merely to distinguish it from the relational egalitarian account that I sketched. Crucially, the interest that the relational account focuses on is not a general interest in giving shape to our lives, but a *specific* interest in *shaping this relationship*. If the concern were with a general interest in giving shape to our lives, then it would be possible that one person's interest would be advanced by having control over the relationship, and the other's by having control over other features of her life. But then we would lack the specific focus on equal power *over the relationship* that is, I think, central to our understanding of friendship.

Neither does the account just sketched assume that each friend has an interest in shaping the relationship in particular (rather than, as on the view distinguished in the previous paragraph, their life in general), which must then be weighed against similar interests other friends have. Instead it assumes that each friend has an interest in shaping the relationship *as an equal* together with others; and that the value of shaping and creating the relationship that is internal to the relationship (rather than derived from the more general concern with personal autonomy) is conditional on the shaping and creating being undertaken as equals.

from friendship to the political domain. That doing so is possible must, however, not blind us to some limits of this argument when it comes to vindicating political equality as an ideal for an actual political community.

Two points in particular deserve highlighting. The first follows from the discussion of malleability as it exists in friendships and in political relations: though each is in principle constrained in some ways and malleable in others, political relations may in practice be much more severely constrained, leaving much less room for the distinctive importance of creating the relationship together as equals. This may impose important limits on the value of egalitarian political arrangements, and the authority of democratic procedures. In fact, there is a genuine worry that any argument that appeals to the value of egalitarian relationships will be confronted with the fact that, however valuable the relationship is, political outcomes are also of enormous instrumental significance—for one, they also affect many other egalitarian relationships, like marriages—so that ensuring that the outcomes are as good as they can be might in practice often take precedence over any concern with the intrinsically valuable relationship in which we might stand to our fellow citizens.⁵¹

The second, and to my mind more important, point is that even if the demands of equal power familiar from the case of friendship may in principle be extended to political relationships, the conditions under which they so extend are much more restrictive than they would have been on the anti-caste model. The egalitarian requirements associated with the anti-caste model ultimately depend on not much more than our general commitment to people's equal moral status, and the thought that societal norms should not deny that status. This explains why the anti-caste model is in principle compatible with unequal power: such inequality need not cast doubt on society's commitment to viewing us all as fundamentally equal. It also entails, however, that the egalitarian demands associated with the anti-caste model apply to societies in general, independently of specific local conditions.

Matters are quite different when it comes to the demands associated with friendship and analogous political relationships. These demands—including, specifically, the demand of equal power—rest on the existence of intrinsically valuable interpersonal relationships. And these relationships exist only if the parties are in some way or another committed to them: they must value their relationship, and grant a suitable role in their deliberation to its norms. To be clear, the relationship can exist even if the parties do not live up to its ideals: Up to some point, we remain friends even if we are both bad friends and regularly neglect the special obligations we owe to each other. And in a group of people who relate to each other in a certain way, there may be

⁵¹ For worries along these lines see, e.g., (Stemplowska and Swift 2018).

significant disagreement about the precise character of the relationship, and yet the relationship plausibly exists and makes normative demands. Still, at some point—most obviously if people lack all disposition to treat each other as equals, but plausibly already well before then—the relationship begins to disintegrate, and its value and normative force to disappear. So on the argument that starts from the friendship conception of relational equality, the demands of political equality, and the reason we have to obey democratic decisions, will be conditional on local circumstances in ways that they would not have been on the alternative anti-caste model.

7.

This chapter has sought to address a particular problem for recently prominent relational egalitarian accounts of political equality: Some influential relational egalitarian arguments take as their starting point the problem of social status hierarchy, and are concerned with the ideal of a society not structured by castes or classes. This ideal straightforwardly applies to political relations. But it does not in fact vindicate the ideal of equal power, and so not the ideal of political equality either. Others take as their starting point the ideal of egalitarian friendship. This ideal does seem to impose a requirement of equal power. But it is much less obvious that this ideal applies to our political community.

Let me conclude by returning to the question, briefly touched upon earlier in this chapter, why I have focused on the particular examples of friendship and caste or class structures to make sense of the relational egalitarian argument for political equality. In Section 2 I emphasized that these two cases figure most prominently in recent discussions of relational equality and democracy. One response to the argument I offer in this chapter is to suggest that the special attention given to these cases in recent discussions has been misguided; or, at least, that recent discussions (and, as a result, also this chapter) have paid insufficient attention to alternative examples of egalitarian relationships that would in fact simultaneously satisfy the twin conditions that this chapter put center-stage: that equal power be an ideal in its own right (*Equal Power*), and that it be an ideal applicable to large-scale political communities (*Political Relationships*). What about (to mention just the examples put to me by various audiences) a philosophy department running its affairs collegially, people on a camping trip planning their weekend together, and members of a *kibbutz* collectively deciding how to organize their common economic life?

Such alternative examples could indeed be useful for making sense of the relational egalitarian argument for political equality. But I suspect that their

usefulness will consist in sharpening our understanding of the relational egalitarian commitments that were implicated by the caste and friendships examples, rather than in putting on the table a different set of foundational egalitarian ideals. To make this thought more concrete: I think that egalitarian friendship, and social status equality, are ideals in their own right. By contrast, when I think about various other examples—like philosophy departments, camping trips, or *kibbutzim*—and their non-derivative value, I am inclined to think that they have such value when they instantiate ideals we paradigmatically associate with friendship or the absence of social status hierarchies. These examples may nonetheless be helpful in bringing out what is truly central to the relevant ideal, and what is just a contingent feature of the paradigmatic relationship with which the ideal is often associated. For instance, reflecting on the camping trip may help us recognize that relations among friends need not involve emotional intimacy, but can instead just consist in certain joint pursuits. Still, if someone were to point out that, ideally, fellow campers should have equal decision-making power over their endeavor, I would agree, not because there is an independent ideal of equal power that is associated with camping trips, but because there is an ideal of a camping trip *among friends* that egalitarian decision-making would help instantiate.

This response—assimilating new examples to the two I have focused on in this chapter—might not always succeed. In particular, it would be inappropriate if the alternative egalitarian relationship cited were truly committed to an ideal of equal power, but the instantiation conditions of that ideal, as exemplified in that relationship, were quite different from those that govern the ideal when it comes to friendship or a society without caste or class inequalities. Yet none of the alternatives I have encountered seem to me to satisfy this requirement.

Finally, I have assumed throughout that a relational egalitarian argument for political equality would start from examples of particular relationships, and preferably ones not too closely tied to politics narrowly conceived. In doing so, I have implicitly set aside two other positions. First, one might think that power inequalities between persons are presumptively problematic as such, independently of any particular kind of relationship (other than the relation of unequal power) in which they stand. There are special conditions that may make such inequalities unproblematic (or at least less problematic)—exit options, voluntariness, etc.—but if these are absent, the sheer fact that power is distributed unequally is objectionable. On such a view, our objection to unequal power does not rest on a prior account of friendship or equal social status with which unequal power proves incompatible; and so vindicating the ideal of political equality would not require identifying the conditions under which such relationships exist among us, in our political community.

But it seems to me we have important reasons to avoid this position. First, treating unequal power as a general problem, independent of particular relationships, would be most plausible if unequal power gave rise to the same complaint in a wide range of intuitively central examples. Yet one of the upshots of this chapter has been that the deep structure of our objections to unequal power in fact varies significantly across different paradigmatic cases. If our intuitions about inequality of power in the context of caste or class structures treat equal power as a baseline, whereas our intuitions about, say, friendship and marriage treat equal power as an ideal in its own right, then this casts significant doubt on the thought that there is indeed a *general* problem of unequal power.

Second, and perhaps more seriously still, a view that treats unequal power as a general problem needs to account for the many relationships in which power inequalities do not seem even presumptively objectionable as such. For instance, I think the unequal power I have over my seven-year-old daughter is not morally problematic as such, qua *unequal* power. (It may, however, be problematic on other grounds that have nothing to do with equality.⁵²) And yet my daughter did not enter into the relationship voluntarily, she lacks exit options, etc. Examples like this strongly suggest that the particular kind of relationship in which we stand to another plays a crucial role in determining whether it matters that we have equal power.

An alternative position concedes that the ideal of equal power is relationship-specific, but suggests that political relationships are a *sui generis* source of egalitarian demands, independently of any appeal to friendship or social status equality. This avoids the worries faced by the view that requirements of equal power are unmediated by particular relationships. But it comes at the cost of giving up on what, in the introduction to this chapter, I suggested is one of the promises of the relational egalitarian defense of political equality: to provide independent argumentative support for our democratic intuitions, rather than simply restating them.⁵³

⁵² I discuss this issue further in (Viehoff 2017).

⁵³ Versions of this chapter have been presented at the 5th OSPP Workshop in Tucson (AZ); at the Colloquium in Political and Legal Theory at Queen's University, Kingston (ON); at a workshop on Political Equality at NYU; at a "New Work in Legal Philosophy" Workshop, organized by Hrafn Asgeirsson and supported by the University of Surrey School of Law; at Princeton's University Center for Human Values; at the Kadish Workshop in Law, Philosophy, and Political Theory at Boalt Law School, UC Berkeley; at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE) in Mexico City; and the Eastern APA. I also presented an early sketch in Amanda Greene and Han van Wietmarschen's graduate seminar in political philosophy at UCL. For their questions and comments I am grateful to the participants at these events, and especially to Daniel Baker (my discussant at Berkeley), Chuck Beitz, Kristen Bell, Colin Bird, Tom Christiano (my discussant in Tucson), Josh Cohen, Dave Estlund, Marc Fleurbaey, Carina Fourie (my discussant at NYU),

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