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1 EQUALLY VIA MOBILITY: WHY SOCIOECONOMIC
2 MOBILITY MATTERS FOR RELATIONAL EQUALITY,
3 DISTRIBUTIVE EQUALITY, AND EQUALITY OF
4 OPPORTUNITY
5

6 BY GOVIND PERSAD*

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8
9 I. INTRODUCTION

10 Since the economic crisis of 2008, think tanks have pursued research
11 into the causes and effects of socioeconomic mobility;¹ columnists and
12 bloggers like Paul Krugman, Tyler Cowen, and Reihan Salam have debated
13 whether mobility is desirable;² and politicians — from both ends of the
14 political spectrum and both sides of the Atlantic — have emphasized
15 mobility’s importance.³ In contrast, socioeconomic mobility has received
16 little attention from philosophers, who have instead focused their atten-
17 tion on social and economic inequality.⁴
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24 * I am grateful to reviewers at *Social Philosophy and Policy* and to Debra Satz, Eamonn
25 Callan, and Joshua Cohen for their comments, and to audiences at the Equality and Public
26 Policy Conference at Ohio University, the Dirty Leviathan Society at Stanford University,
27 and the Intergenerational Justice Conference at the University of York for helpful discussion.

28 ¹ The most notable example is the Economic Mobility Project, a collaboration between
29 prominent American think tanks spanning the political spectrum (the American Enterprise
30 Institute, Brookings Institution, Heritage Foundation, New America Foundation, and
31 Urban Institute): <http://www.economicmobility.org/>.

32 ² Examples include Paul Krugman, “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” *The New York Times*,
33 July 29, 2012, <http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/all-things-bright-and-beautiful/>;
34 Tyler Cowen, “Why Economic Mobility Measures Are Overrated,” *Marginal
35 Revolution*, January 18, 2012, [http://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2012/01/
36 why-economic-mobility-measures-are-overrated.html](http://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2012/01/why-economic-mobility-measures-are-overrated.html); Reihan Salam, “Should We Care
37 About Relative Mobility?” *National Review*, November 29, 2011, <http://www.nationalreview.com/agenda/284379/should-we-care-about-relative-mobility-reihan-salam>.

38 ³ See, for example, Fareed Zakaria, “The Downward Path of Upward Mobility,” *Washington
39 Post*, November 9, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-downward-
40 path-of-upward-mobility/2011/11/09/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-downward-path-of-upward-mobility/2011/11/09/); Jason DeParle, “Harder for Americans to Rise From
41 Lower Rungs,” *New York Times*, January 5, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/
42 us/harder-for-americans-to-rise-from-lower-rungs.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/us/harder-for-americans-to-rise-from-lower-rungs.html); Richard Breen, “Social Mobility
43 and Equality of Opportunity,” *The Economic and Social Review* 41, no. 1 (2010): 413–28.

44 ⁴ As a very rough estimate, a Philosophers’ Index search conducted on October 15, 2013
45 found 31 articles with “mobility” in the title and 52 articles under the “mobility” subject
46 heading; in contrast, 1190 articles contained “equality” in the title (and 294 “inequality”),
47 with 2700 and 397 falling under those subject headings respectively.

1 This essay will examine the connection between socioeconomic mobility
2 and equality, and argue for two conclusions:

- 3
- 4 (a) Socioeconomic mobility is conceptually *distinct* from three common
5 species of equality: (1) equality of opportunity, (2) equality of out-
6 come, and (3) relational equality.
- 7 (b) However, socioeconomic mobility is *connected* — in different
8 ways — to each species of equality, and, if we value one or more of
9 these species of equality, these connections endow it with derivative
10 normative significance.⁵

11

12 I bypass two other, closely related issues in this essay, for reasons
13 of theme and length, but flag them here to avoid confusion. The first
14 is whether socioeconomic mobility has normative significance for reasons
15 unrelated to equality: either in its own right, or via its connection
16 to values other than equality. I take no position on that question here,
17 though I explore the relation between mobility and other values, such
18 as hope and democracy, in other work. The second is whether and why
19 we should value any of the species of equality I discuss — equality of
20 opportunity, equality of outcome, or relational equality. This is well-
21 trodden ground. I do not aim in this short essay to persuade egalitari-
22 ans to value one of these forms of equality over others, nor to persuade
23 nonegalitarians to value equality at all. My goal here is more modest:
24 to show that, *if* you value any of these species of equality, you should
25 care about mobility.

26 Section II differentiates several forms of mobility, and briefly reviews
27 relevant findings from the social sciences. Section III investigates the
28 relationship between mobility and equality of opportunity. Section IV
29 focuses on mobility's relation to equality of outcome. Section V examines
30 the connection between mobility and relational equality.

31 II. DEFINING AND MEASURING MOBILITY

32 A. *Defining mobility*

33

34 All forms of socioeconomic mobility involve changes in an agent's stock
35 of some good — such as income, wealth, or social standing — over time.⁶
36 Measuring socioeconomic mobility requires tracking these changes with
37 respect to a reference point: upward mobility involves an increase in the
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43 ⁵ Since I do not discuss geographic or physical mobility in this essay, I will in what follows
44 use "mobility" to refer exclusively to socioeconomic mobility.)

45 ⁶ Gary Fields, "Income Mobility," in *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, Lawrence E.
Blume and Steven Durlauf, eds. (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

1 individual's stock of goods with respect to the reference point, whereas
2 downward mobility involves a decrease. Choices about *whose goods* to
3 track, *which goods* to track, *what time period* to consider, and *what point of*
4 *comparison* to use differentiate several forms of mobility:

- 5 • Choices about *whose goods* to track differentiate intragenerational
6 mobility, which involves changes in individuals' circumstances,
7 from intergenerational mobility, which involves changes in a
8 family's circumstances.⁷ They also differentiate group mobility
9 from individual mobility.
- 10 • Choices about *which goods* to track differentiates economic
11 mobility, which involves changes in wealth or income; social
12 mobility, which involves changes in occupational status, political
13 power, or public esteem; and other forms of mobility such as
14 educational or housing mobility.⁸ While different forms of mobility
15 are often closely correlated — upward occupational mobility, for
16 instance, often produces upward wealth mobility — they involve
17 the measurement of different goods.
- 18 • Choices about the *time period* to use also differentiate intra-
19 generational from intergenerational mobility. In addition, they
20 differentiate long-term mobility from short-term mobility.
- 21 • Perhaps most important from a normative perspective, choices
22 about the *reference point* differentiate absolute mobility, which uses
23 individuals' own past holdings as a reference point, from relative
24 mobility, which uses others' holdings as the reference point.⁹
25 Upward relative mobility for some implies downward relative
26 mobility for others: if one person moves from a lower decile to the
27 top decile of incomes, someone else in the top decile must drop
28 into a lower decile.
29

30 Because the types of equality discussed in Sections III and IV involve
31 individuals' *comparative* access to opportunities or outcomes, my focus
32 will initially be on *relative* rather than *absolute* mobility. Absolute mobility
33 contributes most clearly to relational equality, which I discuss in Section V.
34
35
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38 ⁷ Ibid., 1 ("In the intergenerational context, the recipient unit is the family, specifically a
39 parent and a child. In the intragenerational context, the recipient unit is the individual or
40 family at two different dates").

41 ⁸ Emily Beller and Michael Hout, "Intergenerational Social Mobility: The United States in
42 Comparative Perspective," *The Future of Children* 16 (2006): 21 ("It is possible to talk about
43 social mobility in general terms, but most researchers focus on one of five specific forms of
44 mobility: educational mobility, occupational mobility, wage mobility, family income mobil-
45 ity, and wealth mobility").

⁹ Julia B. Isaacs, Isabel V. Sawhill, and Ron Haskins, *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility In America* (Washington, DC: Economic Mobility Project, 2008), <http://www.pewstates.org/research/reports/getting-ahead-or-losing-ground-85899375818>, 2.

B. Measuring mobility

Mobility is harder to measure than equality. Obtaining data about individual mobility requires a panel study, which surveys the same individuals at different times and therefore presents the challenge of reidentifying and reenrolling participants.¹⁰ However, data on mobility has been collected despite these challenges. I will not provide an extensive survey of empirical research on relative economic mobility here. Interested readers should consult a comprehensive review.¹¹ Here, however, are some facts about mobility in the United States:

- Intergenerational and intragenerational relative income mobility are limited. Where a person ends up in the social and economic hierarchy depends heavily on her starting place and that of her family.¹² The same is true for relative wealth mobility.¹³
- Intergenerational relative income and wealth mobility upward from the lowest quintile and downward from the highest is lower than mobility in and out of other quintiles. Forty-two percent of children starting in the lowest income quintile remain in that quintile as adults, while only 9 percent starting at the top drop to the bottom; meanwhile, 39 percent of children starting at the top stay there, while only 6 percent rise from the bottom to the top.¹⁴ This shows that population-level mobility rates can obscure important differences in mobility within the population, just as — for instance — measuring the average flow across a wide river may obscure differences between channels of fast-moving water, slower-moving areas, and eddies where the direction of flow may become turbulent or even reverse direction.¹⁵

¹⁰ Jacob Hacker, *The Great Risk Shift* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 21 (“Consider the growing body of research on inequality in the United States These surveys can tell us how many people are rich and how many are poor, and how big the gap between the two is. But they cannot tell us whether the same people are rich or poor from year to year, or whether movement up (or down) the income ladder is greater or smaller than it used to be”).

¹¹ For example, Isaacs, Sawhill, and Haskins, *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground*.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19 (“All Americans do not have an equal shot at getting ahead, and one’s chances are largely dependent on one’s parents’ economic position”); *ibid.*, 39–41 (reviewing intragenerational mobility and finding that 50 percent of fathers’ advantages in the United States are passed on to sons, while the corresponding correlation in Canada and the Scandinavian countries was only 20 percent).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19; see also *ibid.*, 54 (illustrating that 36 percent of children starting in the lowest wealth quintile remain in that quintile as adults, while only 11 percent starting at the top drop to the bottom; meanwhile, 36 percent of children starting at the top stay there, while only 7 percent rise from the bottom to the top).

¹⁵ Miles Corak, *How to Slide Down the “Great Gatsby Curve”: Inequality, Life Chances, and Public Policy in the United States* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2012), <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/report/2012/12/05/46851/how-to-slide-down-the-great-gatsby-curve/>, 8.

- 1 • Intergenerational relative income mobility in the United States
2 has not increased in the past thirty years, and some believe it has
3 decreased.¹⁶ This suggests that (if we think relative mobility is too
4 low) we are not in a temporary downturn but rather in a situation
5 that requires substantial change.
- 6 • Intergenerational and intragenerational relative income mobility
7 differs substantially across countries.¹⁷ This indicates that current
8 levels of relative mobility in the United States do not reflect some
9 more fundamental limit on mobility.
- 10 • The majority of families experience intragenerational absolute
11 upward income mobility: they make more money at midlife than
12 they did when they entered the workforce.¹⁸ Most families also
13 experience intergenerational absolute upward income mobility:
14 family heads make more money than their parents made.¹⁹ But
15 rates of absolute mobility are slowing.²⁰
- 16 • However, the magnitude of this absolute mobility is fairly small:
17 median yearly family income increased by only \$3,772 (17 percent)
18 from 1974 to 2004.²¹ And this mobility is due to women working
19 longer hours, rather than workers earning more per hour: *median*
20 hourly compensation across all workers rose only 10.7 percent
21 from 1973 to 2011 even though *average* hourly compensation grew
22 nearly four times as much,²² and men thirty to thirty-nine years
23 old had lower median income in 2004 than in 1974.²³ So, although
24 families have enjoyed modest upward absolute mobility, well-off
25 workers have enjoyed more than others. Median income is also
26 not keeping pace with productivity, as it did from 1945 to the
27 1970s.²⁴

31
32 ¹⁶ Isaacs, Sawhill, and Haskins, *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground*, 31–32 (reviewing research
33 and concluding that “[o]verall, the most direct evidence of relative mobility across genera-
34 tions does not suggest any strong trend, but . . . some research points to a decline in recent
35 decades”).

36 ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37–42.

37 ¹⁸ Gregory Acs and Austin Nichols, “America Insecure: Changes in the Economic Security of
38 American Families” (Urban Institute Low-Income Working Families Paper 16, February 2010),
39 <http://www.urban.org/publications/412055.html>, 6–10.

40 ¹⁹ Isaacs, Sawhill, and Haskins, *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground*, 17 (finding that 67 percent
41 of Americans who were children in 1968 had higher incomes in 1995–2002 than their parents
42 had in 1967–71).

43 ²⁰ Winship, this volume.

44 ²¹ Isabel V. Sawhill and John Morton, *Economic Mobility: Is the American Dream Alive and*
45 *Well?* (Washington, DC: Economic Mobility Project, 2007), 11.

46 ²² Lawrence Mishel, “The Wedges Between Prosperity and Median Compensation Growth”
47 (Economic Policy Institute Issue Brief #330, April 26, 2012), <http://www.epi.org/publication/ib330-productivity-vs-compensation/>, 3.

48 ²³ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

49 ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2; Sawhill and Morton, *Economic Mobility: Is the American Dream Alive and Well?* 12.

II. SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY AND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

Philosophers, social scientists, and policymakers have often equated mobility with equality of opportunity, which may explain philosophers' comparative inattention to mobility.²⁵ In this section, I will argue that relative mobility serves as a valuable signal that equality of opportunity exists, but that the two concepts are distinct.

I will employ Rawls's definition of "equality of opportunity." Under Rawlsian equality of opportunity,

we might say that those with similar abilities and skills should have similar life chances. More specifically, assuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system. In all sectors of society there should be roughly equal prospects of culture and achievement for everyone similarly motivated and endowed. The expectations of those with the same abilities and aspirations should not be affected by their social class.²⁶

Winship (in this volume) defines equality of opportunity similarly: "inequality of opportunity exists when some are more able than others to achieve their preferred life."²⁷ For both Winship and Rawls, *equality of opportunity* entails more than the absence of discrimination or legal barriers to opportunity, but it does not entail *unlimited freedom* of opportunity: a society can realize equal opportunity even if people have no opportunity to be bank robbers. Rather, equality of opportunity implies equal access to the social and economic positions that exist in society.

It is easy to see how *relative* mobility might correlate with equality of opportunity: for instance, if children who start in different social classes reach the top quintile at similar rates, this suggests that social class does not affect children's opportunities to reach the top quintile. In contrast, while — as Winship observes — *absolute* upward mobility may improve opportunity *levels* for disadvantaged children,²⁸ absolute mobility does not indicate that their opportunities are more *equal*. And shifting the focus away from equality of opportunity toward opportunity levels is not an interpretation of equality of opportunity, but an alternative to that ideal.²⁹

²⁵ For examples, see Breen, "Social Mobility and Equality of Opportunity," 415–16.

²⁶ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999): 63.

²⁷ Winship, this volume.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ For a defense of focusing on opportunity levels rather than equality of opportunity, see Matt Cavanagh, *Against Equality of Opportunity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003); see also Benjamin Sachs, "The Limits of Fair Equality of Opportunity," *Philosophical Studies* 160 (2011): 323, n. 49. For a criticism of the move from equality of opportunity to opportunity levels, see Richard Kahlenberg, *The Remedy: Class, Race, and Affirmative Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 88.

1 If we normatively value the kind of equality of opportunity that Rawls
2 and Winship discuss, we should therefore care about the existence of mobility
3 in society. (Recall that I do not attempt here to provide an account of *why* we
4 should value this kind of equality of opportunity. Some may treat equality
5 of opportunity as valuable in itself, while others may treat it a signal that
6 some deeper underlying value is being fulfilled.³⁰) However, mobility
7 is not equivalent to equality of opportunity, nor is mobility a constituent of
8 equality of opportunity. Rather, mobility is a signal that equality of oppor-
9 tunity is present: it correlates loosely with equality of opportunity but does
10 not constitute it.

11 First, mobility is not a necessary consequence of equal opportunity,
12 because observed mobility levels depend not only on what opportunities
13 individuals have *available* but also on which opportunities they *prefer* to
14 take. Low levels of mobility could be attributable to differing preferences
15 rather than unequal opportunities: if, say, people in a cosmopolitan com-
16 munity pursue opportunities for career advancement while those in a
17 conservative community prefer not to.³¹ This example indicates that
18 mobility is not a *component* of equal opportunity: rather, low mobility is a
19 defeasible *signal* that opportunities were unequal. Immobility-producing
20 preferences are one potential defeater to the inference from low mobility
21 to unequal opportunity.

22 Second, no specific level of mobility — not even “perfect mobility,”
23 which exists where a person’s past status or parents’ status does not cor-
24 relate at all with their present status³² — is sufficient, without more,
25 to show that equal opportunity exists. For example, perfect mobility
26 in a society where middle-class children, on average, are much more
27 talented and able than the children of rich parents would not demon-
28 strate the existence of equal opportunity, since equal opportunity
29 in such a context might in fact produce a *negative* correlation between
30 parents’ and children’s status. The overarching point is that, since mobility
31 data provide us information about correlations in status but not about
32 the specific processes that produce those correlations, observed mobility
33 levels (whether low or high) cannot by themselves demonstrate the pres-
34 ence or absence of equal opportunity.

35 Third, equality of opportunity (in either Rawls’s or Winship’s sense)
36 depends both on *what opportunities* people have to move between dispa-
37 rate positions and *how disparate* those positions are. Immobility is a signal
38

39 ³⁰ I am grateful to Jerry Gaus for this observation.

40 ³¹ Adam Swift, “Would Perfect Mobility be Perfect?” *European Sociological Review* 20 (2004):
41 8–9, discusses how individual preferences may lead individuals, even when offered broad
42 opportunities, to choose careers in a way that leads to unequal mobility rates. See also
43 Guadalupe Valdes, *Con Respeto: Bridging the Distances Between Culturally Diverse Families and*
44 *Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996), 189, who discusses how cultural norms can
45 limit the pursuit of opportunities and so restrict mobility.

³² Breen, “Social Mobility and Equality of Opportunity,” 417; Swift, “Would Perfect
45 Mobility be Perfect?” 2.

1 that individuals lack opportunities to move between positions, but if the
 2 available positions are very similar, opportunity can be highly equal even
 3 though opportunities to move are nearly absent. To take the most extreme
 4 case, if there is no labor specialization and therefore only one social position
 5 in a given society, there is equal opportunity even though there is no
 6 mobility.³³ This outcome, as Winship observes, may produce a low *level* of
 7 opportunity, but is consistent with *equality* of opportunity.³⁴

8 Finally, whether intragenerational or intergenerational relative mobility
 9 is relevant to equality of opportunity depends on how we understand
 10 equality of opportunity. If we interpret equality of opportunity as requiring
 11 only a “moment of equal opportunity,”³⁵ as Benjamin Sachs suggests we
 12 should, then equality of opportunity does not require *intragenerational*
 13 mobility; there is no reason to worry about a society where very few
 14 workers move up or down over a given ten-year period, as long as they
 15 all at *some* point — for example, at age eighteen — enjoyed an equal
 16 opportunity to compete for advantaged positions.³⁶ However, Sachs's
 17 interpretation of equality of opportunity connects equality of opportunity
 18 with *intergenerational* mobility: if someone's income in childhood
 19 strongly correlates with his or her income in adulthood, this raises
 20 (defeasible) concerns about whether the children of the poor and the
 21 children of the rich ever enjoyed equal chances. In contrast, if we interpret
 22 equality of opportunity as applying “at each and every stage in a
 23 person's life,”³⁷ then some degree of *intragenerational* mobility will correlate
 24 with equality of opportunity.

25 Ultimately, relative mobility is normatively important as an indicator of
 26 certain forms of equality of opportunity. Although we can have mobility
 27 without equality of opportunity, and equality of opportunity without
 28 much mobility, mobility represents a useful and observable proxy for
 29 equality of opportunity. But relative mobility is not equivalent to equality
 30 of opportunity, nor does it produce equality of opportunity.

31 32 III. SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY AND DISTRIBUTIVE EQUALITY

33
34 Part II argued that relative mobility is a proxy for, rather than a cause
 35 of, equality of opportunity. The relationship between relative mobility

36
37 ³³ Isaacs, Sawhill, and Haskins, *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground*, 4 (“If there were little
 38 or no economic inequality and all incomes across society were similar, discussions of
 39 relative mobility would have little resonance: people could not improve their economic
 40 status significantly by changing ranks. Put differently, if the rungs on the economic ladder
 41 were closer together, then occupying one rung rather than another would have few consequences”).

42 ³⁴ Winship, this volume.

43 ³⁵ For this phrase, see Clare Chambers, “Each Outcome Is Another Opportunity: Problems
 44 with the Moment of Equal Opportunity,” *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* 8 (2009): 382–89.
 45 I am grateful to Chiara Cordelli for this reference.

³⁶ Sachs, “The Limits of Fair Equality of Opportunity,” 323.

³⁷ Chambers, “Each Outcome Is Another Opportunity,” 389.

1 and distributive equality is different: relative mobility is not just a proxy
 2 for distributive equality, but can also help ensure that goods are distrib-
 3 uted more equally over the long term. Therefore, if we value distributive
 4 equality, we should care about relative mobility not as a proxy but instead
 5 as a way of realizing distributive equality.

6 As with equality of opportunity, a comprehensive defense of the nor-
 7 mative importance of distributive equality is outside the scope of this
 8 project.³⁸ As with inequality of opportunity, some may regard distributive
 9 inequality as objectionable in itself, while others may believe that certain
 10 forms of distributive inequality hamper the achievement of other values.
 11 Milton Friedman seems to take the latter view when he asks us to:

12
 13 [c]onsider two societies that have the same distribution of annual
 14 income. In one there is great mobility and change so that the position
 15 of particular families in the income hierarchy varies widely from year
 16 to year. In the other, there is great rigidity so that each family stays in
 17 the same position year after year. Clearly, in any meaningful sense, the
 18 second would be the more unequal society. The one kind of inequality
 19 is a sign of dynamic change, social mobility, equality of opportunity;
 20 the other, of a status society.³⁹

21
 22 Although Friedman seems to prefer the first, mobile society to the sec-
 23 ond, rigid one, he may regard the inequality in the rigid society as
 24 objectionable, not in itself but because it is indicative of an undesirable
 25 “status society.” One reason a status society may be objectionable involves
 26 relational equality, which I discuss in Section V.

27 There are two ways of minimizing long-term distributive inequality:

- 28
 29 1) Minimize distributive inequality over short time scales;
 30 2) Permit distributive inequality over short time scales, but ensure — as
 31 in Friedman’s first, mobile society — that levels of relative mobility
 32 are high.

33
 34 A society with unequal positions but frequent mobility between positions
 35 will exhibit high inequality *at* any given time — some people will be busi-
 36 ness leaders while others are janitors — but low inequality when viewed
 37 *over* a longer time scale.⁴⁰ The Economic Mobility Project offers a stylized
 38 example, similar to Friedman’s, to illustrate how relative mobility reduces
 39 long-term inequality:

40
 41 ³⁸ For discussion of potential justifications for distributive equality, see Voigt and Wester,
 42 this volume.

43 ³⁹ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962): 171.

44 ⁴⁰ See Wojciech Kopczuk, Emmanuel Saez, and Jae Song, “Earnings Inequality and Mobility
 45 in the United States: Evidence from Social Security Data since 1937,” *Quarterly Journal of
 Economics* 91 (2010): 96–97.

1 Think of a hotel in which some of the rooms are luxurious executive
 2 suites while others are small and modest. The executive suites may
 3 be getting fancier over time and the modest rooms ever more modest.
 4 But if a different group of people occupies the executive suites each
 5 year, and everyone has a decent shot at staying in these fancier rooms,
 6 people have less reason to complain. Relative mobility is similar
 7 to this kind of room-changing. In particular, if relative mobility had
 8 increased at the same time that income inequality has risen, then there
 9 would be less reason for concern about rising inequality.⁴¹

10
 11 Because people move from janitorial to leadership positions, or because
 12 janitors' children grow up to be leaders, incomes and social positions in
 13 a society with high levels of mobility will converge over long time scales,
 14 as when we compare individuals' lifetimes (if we have high intragenerational
 15 relative mobility) or the history of family lines (if we have high
 16 intergenerational relative mobility).⁴²

17 But, recall that establishing and maintaining *short-term* distributive
 18 equality is also a way of realizing long-term distributive equality. Why
 19 should a society that cares about distributive equality invest in promoting
 20 relative mobility — increasing movement up and down the ladder —
 21 rather than focusing its efforts on bringing the rungs closer together by
 22 promoting short-term equality? The most persuasive case I can imagine
 23 for pursuing distributive equality via relative mobility rather than via
 24 short-term equality rests on the efficiency of labor specialization and
 25 organizational hierarchy. If Ann specializes in baking bread and Beth
 26 specializes in cheesemaking, each is more efficient than she would be
 27 if she had to engage simultaneously in both forms of labor.⁴³ Similarly,
 28 social arrangements that allow for some hierarchy in civil society, employ-
 29 ment, and governance are able to function more effectively than those lack-
 30 ing managers or leaders.⁴⁴ In contrast, short-term equality of status and
 31 income does not allow for specialization or hierarchy.

32 Relative mobility, then, represents a path toward a potential reconcilia-
 33 tion of efficiency with distributive equality, because it permits us to achieve
 34 distributive equality without needing to ensure short-term equality. Paul
 35

36
 37 ⁴¹ Isaacs, Sawhill, and Haskins, *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground*, 29.

38 ⁴² For a graphical illustration of how relative mobility generates long-term equality, see
 39 Markus Gangl, Joakim Palme, and Lane Kenworthy, "Is High Inequality Offset by Mobil-
 40 ity?" (Paper presented at the International Sociological Association's Research Commit-
 41 tee on Poverty, Social Welfare and Social Policy, September 8, 2007), available at <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~lkenwor/ishighinequalityoffsetbymobility.pdf>, 2–6.

42 ⁴³ Recognition of the efficiency of specialization goes back to Adam Smith, *The Wealth of*
 43 *Nations*; see also Gary S. Becker and Kevin M. Murphy, "The Division of Labor, Coordination
 44 Costs, and Knowledge," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 107 (1990): 1137.

45 ⁴⁴ For two prominent theories of why hierarchy is efficient, see Ronald H. Coase, "The Nature
 of the Firm," *Economica* 4.16 (1937): 386–405, and Oliver E. Williamson, "Markets and Hier-
 archies: Some Elementary Considerations," *American Economic Review* 63.2 (1973): 316–25.

1 Gomberg and Andrew Sayer have recently argued that fairness requires
2 the abandonment of specialization and hierarchy,⁴⁵ which — if the empirical
3 assumptions above are correct — would greatly diminish efficiency. Adopting
4 their proposals would lead to our sharing work more equally, but our
5 productivity dropping sharply. In contrast, relative mobility allows us to
6 maintain high levels of productivity while widely distributing — at least
7 over a long time horizon — the benefits of this productivity. In a society
8 with relative mobility, even if cheesemakers *currently* earn more than
9 bakers, bakers' children are not locked into becoming bakers themselves,
10 nor are cheesemakers guaranteed their current high incomes or bakers
11 locked into their career for a lifetime. Similarly, those who currently occupy
12 high positions in an organizational hierarchy do not enjoy their positions
13 for an entire lifetime, nor can they pass their status on to their children.
14 Relative mobility will in time move others up into these positions, where
15 they, too, can for a time enjoy the higher status that accompanies them.

16 Additionally, short-term equality may be inefficient given the indi-
17 visible nature of existing goods in society. For instance, strict short-term
18 equality in housing or education implies that no one may live in elegant
19 houses that not all may occupy, or attend exceptional universities not
20 simultaneously accessible to all. In contrast, relative mobility can allow
21 us to benefit from these indivisible goods while dividing up their benefits
22 more equally than a society with fixed hierarchies would.⁴⁶

23 The advantages to the distributive egalitarian of pursuing distributive
24 equality by way of relative mobility rather than moment-by-moment
25 equality are now clear: relative mobility enables society to achieve distrib-
26 utive equality, at least in the long term, without having to level down
27 indivisible goods or give up on the benefits of specialization. The question
28 is whether achieving distributive equality via relative mobility has any
29 disadvantages when compared to achieving it via short-term equality.
30 I will discuss two such potential downsides. The first involves loss aver-
31 sion: relative mobility may be psychologically difficult to accept. The second
32 involves the possibility that short-term equality matters in itself.

33
34
35 ⁴⁵ See Paul Gomberg, *How to Make Opportunity Equal: Race and Contributive Justice* (2007):
36 166–67 (arguing that we should “change the organization of production so that opportu-
37 nity to perform complex labor is unlimited”); Andrew Sayer, “Contributive Justice and
38 Meaningful Work,” *Res Publica* 15 (2009): 12 (“Even if one does accept the efficiency/cost
39 and feasibility objections, it may be argued that there are nevertheless overriding consid-
40 erations that outweigh these, for they take no account of the human consequences in terms
41 of workers' well-being and contributive justice. Is it 'efficient' — or socially just — to
42 restrict the development of large numbers of individuals' skills by confining them to rou-
43 tine work? Is it 'efficient' or just to deny them the recognition that doing complex work can
44 bring and the self-esteem that tends to follow from that?”).

45 ⁴⁶ The argument that relative mobility more fairly allocates indivisible goods resembles
that in favor of random allocation of a scarce resource. See John Broome, “Selecting People
Randomly,” *Ethics* 95, no. 1 (1984): 48. (“Random selection . . . can help to reduce the conflict
between fairness and the general good, making it possible to increase one without too much
damage to the other”).

1 A. *Should we cater to loss-averse preferences?*

2
3 Social scientists discussing the ability of relative mobility to mitigate
4 inequality note that a society with frequent mobility can be psychologically
5 burdensome, particularly on those who fall from advantaged positions.⁴⁷
6 These observations often appeal to the psychological phenomenon of
7 loss aversion to argue that relative mobility is undesirable from a wel-
8 farist standpoint.⁴⁸ We therefore face a trilemma: either we must abandon
9 distributive equality, accept the inefficiencies associated with short-term
10 equality, or endure the psychological stress that relative mobility causes.

11 One approach to this trilemma — one which involves adopting a wel-
12 farist point of view — is empirical: social scientists could attempt to
13 measure whether mobility's fulfillment of inequality-averse preferences
14 and its contribution to efficiency produces enough psychological satisfac-
15 tion to compensate for its frustration of loss-averse preferences. Here, it
16 is worth noting that there may be psychological gains from mobility —
17 if people experience psychological satiation after remaining at the same
18 level for some time, then a life that involves upward and downward mo-
19 bility may actually be welfare enhancing.⁴⁹ This empirical approach faces
20 a number of problems. Measuring psychological satisfaction is empirically
21 difficult. And it is not obvious that maximizing psychological satisfaction
22 on a population scale is a normatively desirable goal: the well-off have the
23 most to lose from relative mobility, whereas the worst-off stand to gain.⁵⁰

24 I will take a different approach, which queries the normative importance
25 of loss aversion rather than focusing on its prevalence or psychological
26 effects. There is broad agreement that satisfying certain individual pref-
27 erences is not an appropriate goal of public policy. These include *unjust*
28 preferences (e.g., the pleasure a racist receives when minorities are subject
29 to invidious discrimination), as well as — though more debatably — *external*
30 preferences (preferences about how someone else's life goes) and *tuistic*
31 preferences (preferences that involve comparing one's own well-being
32 or stock of goods to others').⁵¹ Loss aversion seems structurally similar,
33

34
35 ⁴⁷ See Nicholas Rohde, Kam Ki Tang and Prasada Rao, "Income Inequality, Mobility and
36 Economic Insecurity in Australia" (University of Queensland School of Economics Discussion
37 Paper No. 407, March 2010), [http://www.uq.edu.au/economics/407-income-inequality-
mobility-and-economic-insecurity-in-australia](http://www.uq.edu.au/economics/407-income-inequality-mobility-and-economic-insecurity-in-australia), 3.

38 ⁴⁸ Cowen, "Why Economic Mobility Measures are Overrated" ("For a given level of
39 income, if some are moving up others are moving down. Do you take theories of wage
40 rigidity seriously? If so, you might favor less relative mobility, other things remaining equal.
41 More upward — and thus downward — relative mobility probably means less aggregate
42 happiness, due to habit formation and frame of reference effects").

43 ⁴⁹ Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

44 ⁵⁰ See Krugman, "All Things Bright and Beautiful" (criticizing Cowen's defense of a society
45 that lacks social mobility).

⁵¹ For an overview of the literature on welfarist responses to unjust, external, and tuistic
preferences, see Howard F. Chang, "A Liberal Theory of Social Welfare: Fairness, Utility, and
the Pareto Principle," *Yale Law Journal* 110 (2000): 173, 183–94.

1 though not identical, to tuistic preferences such as envy. Both John Rawls
 2 and David Gauthier have argued that social policy should not cater to
 3 envious preferences: rational individuals care about their own holdings,
 4 not the extent to which their holdings exceed others'.⁵² Similarly, it might
 5 seem, rational individuals care about their own holdings of goods over
 6 a lifetime, not the extent to which their holdings exceed their *own* past
 7 holdings, their parents' holdings, or others' holdings. As such, the sat-
 8 isfaction of loss-averse preferences, like the satisfaction of envious pref-
 9 erences, would seem an inappropriate object of public policy. This is so
 10 particularly if we imagine the task of public policy — as Rawls does — as
 11 providing all-purpose goods to individuals in society rather than catering
 12 to their psychological well-being.⁵³ Although one might worry that the
 13 case for distributive equality itself rests on tuistic preferences, there are
 14 reasons to care about distributive equality that do not appeal to tuistic
 15 preferences: distributive equality may be a good in itself, may be valu-
 16 able in virtue of its contribution to welfare given the diminishing marginal
 17 utility of resources, or may be a proxy for some other value such as rela-
 18 tional equality.

19 To the extent that we remain unpersuaded by the above normative
 20 argument against counting loss-averse preferences,⁵⁴ we face the problem
 21 of balancing the burden of loss aversion against the benefits of specializa-
 22 tion. Absolute upward mobility can be relevant here, as Benjamin
 23 Friedman has argued: according to Friedman, even if relative mobility
 24 drops individuals into a lower income decile, they will not experience that
 25 *relative* drop as psychologically burdensome as long as they also move
 26 upward in *absolute* terms.⁵⁵ This would then provide an additional reason
 27 to value upward absolute mobility: not only does it improve well-being,
 28 but it also makes relative mobility possible. Another way of minimizing
 29

30 ⁵² See Ann Cudd, "Contractarianism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Edward N. Zalta,
 31 ed., 2012), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/contractarianism/> ("Rawls
 32 and Gauthier . . . have argued that negative tuistic preferences (envy, jealousy, spite, ven-
 33 geance) make cooperation for mutual advantage impossible and therefore are irrational").

34 ⁵³ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1999), at xiii.

35 ⁵⁴ For a criticism of Rawls and Gauthier's exclusion of tuistic preferences from social
 36 policy, see Joseph Heath, "Envy and Efficiency," *Revue de Philosophie Économique* 13 (2006): 2,
 37 <http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~jheath/e&e.pdf> ("The way that 'envious' preferences get
 38 filtered out has the effect of completely invalidating any concern people may have about
 39 their relative standing in the economy or in any other domain of social interaction. This has
 40 meant that theorists like Rawls and Gauthier have had almost nothing useful to say about
 41 status, along with other concerns which, for better or for worse, occupy a very central role in
 42 people's value systems.").

43 ⁵⁵ Benjamin M. Friedman, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth* (New York: Knopf,
 44 2005), 86 ("[U]nder robust economic growth the fundamental asymmetry between 'more'
 45 and 'less' takes on reduced importance because, for most people, downward mobility —
 should that be someone's lot — does not mean 'less' but merely not as much 'more' as they
 might otherwise enjoy. Over a far broader range of the income distribution, therefore, people
 in a growing economy will be willing to accept enhanced mobility, and they are willing to
 accept measures like anti-discrimination laws, or special education programs for children
 from low-income families, designed to make actual mobility greater").

1 the effects of loss aversion might involve stressing the fact that individuals'
 2 social and economic positions are subject to change, in order to discourage
 3 psychological attachment to one's present position.⁵⁶ A final approach
 4 would be to couple relative mobility with a generous social minimum, so
 5 that downward mobility will not provoke anxiety about destitution.

6 An additional reason to doubt the normative relevance of catering to
 7 loss-averse preferences rests on a concern about loss aversion being collec-
 8 tively self-defeating. Even if each person is loss-averse and so *individually*
 9 prefers a lower level of relative mobility, each person (or, at least, society
 10 as a whole) may be better off, even counting the psychological burdens
 11 of loss aversion, if the level of relative mobility in society is higher than
 12 they would have chosen for themselves. Such an argument would parallel
 13 Robert H. Frank's case for collective regulation of positional goods: even
 14 if each person would like to be positionally better off than others, we may
 15 prohibit certain forms of positional competition because they leave us all
 16 worse off.⁵⁷

17
 18 *B. Does short-term distributive inequality matter?*
 19

20 Dennis McKerlie asserts that short-term equality is valuable in itself:

21
 22 [I]magine a new kind of egalitarian society. It contains great inequality,
 23 with happier lives attached to certain social positions. But at a fixed
 24 time people change places and switch from a superior position to an
 25 inferior one or vice versa. One example would be a feudal society
 26 in which peasants and nobles exchange roles every ten years. The
 27 result is that people's lives as wholes are equally happy. Nevertheless
 28 during a given time period the society contains great inequality, and
 29 in one sense this always remains true. I will call this system 'changing
 30 places egalitarianism.' If equality between complete lives were all that
 31 mattered, an egalitarian could not object to it. But I think that many
 32 egalitarians would find it objectionable.⁵⁸
 33

34 Although McKerlie does not use the term "relative mobility," his view
 35 would support the importance of short-term equality, and would there-
 36 fore show that distributive egalitarians have reason to select short-term
 37 equality as the way of realizing long-term distributive equality ("equality
 38 between complete lives").
 39

40 ⁵⁶ Nathan Novemsky and Daniel Kahneman, "The Boundaries of Loss Aversion," *Journal*
 41 *of Marketing Research* (2005): 124, discuss how thinking of goods as temporarily held reduces
 42 loss aversion; Dylan M. Smith et al., "Happily Hopeless: Adaptation to a Permanent, but not
 43 to a Temporary, Disability," *Health Psychology* 28 (2009): 787, discuss how seeing a disability
 44 as temporary prevents psychological adaptation to that disability.

45 ⁵⁷ Robert H. Frank, *Luxury Fever: Money and Happiness in an Era of Excess* (Princeton, NJ:
 Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵⁸ Dennis McKerlie, "Equality and Time," *Ethics* 99 (1989): 479.

1 The feudal society may be objectionable because it violates *relational*
2 equality, as I will discuss in Section V, but it is very hard to see why short-
3 term *distributive* inequality between people matters. McKerlie himself
4 admits as much:

5
6 If two people will see a dentist tomorrow, [concern about short-term
7 equality] would tell them to schedule simultaneous appointments so
8 that there will be equality in suffering at that time. Are there serious
9 egalitarian reasons for preferring two 10:30 appointments to an
10 appointment at 10 and an appointment at 11?⁵⁹
11

12 McKerlie concedes that there is no reason to choose simultaneous
13 appointments, but does so for the wrong reason, concluding that inequality
14 lacks moral significance if “the time periods within which the inequality
15 is measured are too short.”⁶⁰ But lengthening the time period doesn’t
16 make short-term inequality any more objectionable. Even if rehabilitating
17 a broken leg takes a year, two people breaking their legs in different years
18 seems no more objectionable than their breaking their legs in the same
19 year. Although short-term *insufficiency* may count against the pursuit of
20 efficiency or distributive inequality,⁶¹ this reason appeals to humanitarian
21 considerations rather than distributive ones.

22 Does the broken leg example prove too much — does it show that *long-*
23 *term* distributive inequality is patently irrelevant when it does not involve
24 relational inequality? I do not believe so. It seems plausible — though not
25 decisive — that one person suffering *two* broken legs is worse than two
26 people each suffering one.⁶² If we have to decide whom to save from a broken
27 leg, it makes sense to save the person who has already had to suffer a broken
28 leg. (The pull of distributive equality, however, is weak in comparison to
29 that of well-being: if we can only save one of two people from a broken
30 leg, we should do it. That both of their legs being broken would better
31 realize distributive equality is irrelevant.)

32 Ultimately, then, relative mobility should matter to distributive egalitarians.
33 It enables the realization of long-term distributive equality while
34 allowing for the efficiency of labor specialization and indivisible goods.
35 While relative mobility is not the only way of achieving long-term distributive
36 equality, it is the best way of achieving long-term distributive
37 equality without sacrificing well-being. Relative mobility can contribute
38 to distributive equality.
39
40

41 ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 483.

42 ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

43 ⁶¹ Walter E. Schaller, “Rawls, the Difference Principle, and Economic Inequality,” *Pacific*
44 *Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (1998): 376.

45 ⁶² For an argument that distributive equality should be the default, see Bruce A. Ackerman,
“On Getting What We Don’t Deserve,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 1, no. 1 (1983).

1 IV. SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY AND RELATIONAL EQUALITY

2
3 McKerlie's example of nobles and peasants raises a third question —
4 one that he overlooks — about mobility: What implications does relative
5 mobility have for relational equality, which (in Elizabeth Anderson's ver-
6 sion) focuses on providing each citizen the capabilities needed to avoid
7 oppressive social relationships and to participate as an equal citizen in a
8 democracy?⁶³ In this section, I will consider two questions: (a) whether
9 short-term inequality plus relative mobility is compatible with relational
10 equality, and (b) whether absolute mobility is sufficient for relational
11 equality.

12
13 *A. Is short-term inequality plus relative mobility compatible with*
14 *relational equality?*

15
16 Some of McKerlie's critics have argued that our response to the nobles
17 and peasants case does not reflect worries about short-term inequality,
18 but rather concerns about relational inequality.⁶⁴ Another example of
19 McKerlie's also raises the question of relational equality:

20
21 Most of us believe that there should be equality in a marriage.
22 A marriage in which the husband makes all of the important
23 decisions, and achieves his own goals with his wife's help, can be
24 criticized for not being an equal partnership. Rather than having
25 the inequality continue throughout the marriage, it would be
26 better if the wife had her turn at being the leading partner — if,
27 later in the marriage, she were able to achieve her own goals with
28 the assistance of her husband. Then, if we think about the marriage
29 as a whole, the husband and wife have equal shares in decision-
30 making and responsibility. Even if the marriage does change in this
31 way, we would not regard it as the best kind of marriage. It is not
32 an ideal marriage because the husband and wife are never equal
33 partners during the marriage. There is no time at which they share
34 decision-making and responsibility. The fact that their shares of
35 these goods accumulated through time are equal is important, but
36 it does not make up for this deficiency.⁶⁵

37
38
39 ⁶³ Elizabeth Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999): 316. For a
40 more general discussion of relational equality, see Wester and Voigt, this volume.

41 ⁶⁴ R. I. Sikora, "Six Viewpoints for Assessing Egalitarian Distribution Schemes," *Ethics* 99
42 (1989): 493–94; Matthew D. Adler, "Well-being, Inequality and Time: The Time-Slice Problem
43 and its Policy Implications" (University of Pennsylvania Law School Institute for Law
44 and Economics Research Paper No. 07–17, 2008), [http://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/
viewcontent.cgi?article=5233](http://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5233), 20.

45 ⁶⁵ Dennis McKerlie, "Equality Between Age-Groups," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 21
(1992): 289.

1 McKerlie draws the wrong moral in the marriage case, concluding that
2 the marriage example shows “that matching a present inequality with an
3 inequality at some other time in favor of the other person does not destroy
4 the significance of the current inequality.”⁶⁶ But the oppressive nature of the
5 relationship between husband and wife, or noble and peasant, may worry
6 us even if — as I have argued — the short-term inequality should not.

7 The question, then, is whether a society with short-term inequality but
8 high relative mobility will entail the objectionable relational inequality
9 that exists between nobles and peasants or between McKerlie’s imagined
10 spouses. The answer, I believe, depends on the details of the society’s eco-
11 nomic structure. Imagine three different structures:

12
13 *Mobile Entrepreneurs:* Workers’ income and status vary from year to
14 year, but workers are all entrepreneurs in small businesses with flat
15 hierarchies —higher-income workers do not exercise managerial
16 authority over others.

17
18 *Mobile Bureaucracy:* Workers take turns functioning as managers and
19 as managed employees. When workers are in managerial roles, their
20 income and status is higher; when workers are in nonmanagerial
21 roles, their income and status is lower.

22
23 *Crony Capitalism:* Workers are divided into groups whose income
24 and status varies dramatically from year to year depending on which
25 group controls political and economic power. No group invariably
26 dominates the struggle, but the group in charge at any given time
27 exercises domineering authority over the others.

28
29 I see no immediate reason to find *Mobile Entrepreneurs* objectionable:
30 workers enjoy long-term distributive equality as well as equality of social
31 standing and power. In contrast, *Crony Capitalism* — like McKerlie’s
32 example of peasants and nobles — seems objectionable. The most compli-
33 cated case is *Mobile Bureaucracy*. Here, the workers moving up and down
34 stand in power relations over each other, unlike in *Mobile Entrepreneurs*, but
35 these relations are not obviously oppressive, as they are in *Crony Capitalism*.
36 I am inclined to believe that managerial power — which arguably is
37 a major source of corporate efficiency — does not inevitably constitute
38 oppression, though this depends on the details of workplace governance.⁶⁷
39 As long as managers are accountable to their employees, the manager/
40 employee distinction should be compatible with nonoppressive social
41 relations.

42
43 ⁶⁶ Ibid., 290.

44 ⁶⁷ On workplace governance, see Anderson, “Equality and Freedom in the Workplace:
45 Recovering Republican Insights,” this volume.

1 However, even short-term dispersion of income, wealth, or status
 2 between different individuals in society — if it becomes too extreme — might
 3 itself undermine relational equality and thus render cases like *Mobile*
 4 *Entrepreneurs* objectionable. Consider, for instance, the concern Joshua
 5 Cohen raises about “a community with no very needy members” in which,
 6 nonetheless,

8 [p]laying the incentives that are necessary, given de facto preferences,
 9 to maximize the advantage of the least advantaged results in extreme
 10 income dispersion: a dispersion that we are inclined to find objection-
 11 able or excessive, either because of the preferences that produce it or,
 12 more likely, just because it strikes us as objectionable that some people
 13 live that much better than others.⁶⁸

15 Cohen asserts that “[l]arge dispersion cases [are] objectionable in part
 16 because the sheer magnitude of differences may be taken as indicating
 17 lack of respect.”⁶⁹

18 Why, exactly, does Cohen think extreme dispersions are objectionable?
 19 Their objectionable nature does not stem from the absolute disadvantage
 20 of the worst-off members, since no one is very needy. (And, therefore
 21 adding absolute upward mobility will not solve the problem.) Nor is the
 22 objection grounded in distributive inequality: a smaller income disper-
 23 sion would be unequal but would not be objectionable. Nor is it grounded
 24 in the tuistic preferences of the worst-off: Cohen relies on Rawls — who
 25 rejects tuistic preferences — for the claim that some large dispersions
 26 “cannot help but cause a loss of self-esteem.”⁷⁰ Even when large disper-
 27 sions produce envy, Rawls believes such envy is different from ordinary
 28 envy: it is the *result* of the direct loss of self-respect, rather than the *cause*
 29 of that loss.⁷¹ So, Cohen’s objection — as I reconstruct it — is that extreme
 30 income dispersions are not only *evidential* of relational inequality but also
 31 directly *expressive* of relational inequality.

32 Another relational egalitarian, Debra Satz, agrees that relational
 33 equality has comparative elements.⁷² In her view, the capacity to function
 34 as an equal citizen depends not only on one’s own knowledge, but also
 35 on how one’s knowledge compares to that of others.⁷³ Extreme disparities
 36 in knowledge are therefore inconsistent with relational equality.

68 Joshua Cohen, “Taking People as They Are?” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 30 (2001): 370.

69 *Ibid.*, 385.

70 *Ibid.*, 372 (quoting Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 468).

71 *Ibid.*

72 Debra Satz, “Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship,” *Ethics* 117 (2007): 635
 (“[I]f we reflect on the civic purposes that we want a conception of educational adequacy to
 44 serve, we will endorse only conceptions that contain comparative and relational elements”).

73 *Ibid.*, 636–37.

1 It remains unclear how far Cohen's and Satz's concern applies to extreme
2 *short-term* rather than extreme long-term income dispersion. In *Mobile*
3 *Entrepreneurs*, although a large gap exists at any given moment between
4 the successful and the unsuccessful, other social mechanisms are working
5 effectively to ensure that people move up and down intergenerationally
6 and intragenerationally. And everyone in *Mobile Entrepreneurs* enjoys
7 a roughly equal lifetime income that is higher they would have enjoyed
8 in a society with greater short-term equality. Under these circumstances,
9 perhaps extreme moment-by-moment income dispersions will be less
10 expressive of disrespect: individuals doing comparatively less well now
11 can be assured that they, or their children, will do better soon, and those
12 momentarily doing very well cannot regard themselves as forming an
13 enduring class that is superior to others. There will not be knowledge that
14 some people or families are forever unable to access. Yet people will still
15 stand in starkly different positions as they interact in day-to-day life, and
16 this in itself may be destructive of relational equality.

17 Evaluating the normative status of societies like *Mobile Entrepreneurs*
18 is practically pressing given actual economic trends away from a "diamond"
19 pattern of income distributions with a large number of individuals
20 near the median income toward an "hourglass" pattern with many fewer
21 middle-class individuals.⁷⁴ Does relational equality require preserving
22 a "diamond" structure with many middle-class jobs?⁷⁵ Or can relational
23 equality be achieved even in an "hourglass" society so long as we have
24 high relative mobility of individuals into and out of the top positions of
25 the hourglass?

26 My ultimate answer to this last question — and to the initial question
27 of this subsection — is equivocal. If we find Cohen's concern about large
28 dispersions compelling, and believe it extends to large short-term dis-
29 persions, then we should deny that an "hourglass" society can achieve
30 relational equality by way of relative mobility, and instead believe that
31 relational equality also requires a range constraint on short-term inequality
32
33

34
35 ⁷⁴ See, for example, Douglas Massey, "The Age of Extremes: Concentrated Affluence
36 and Poverty in the Twenty-First Century," *Demography* 33 (1996): 403 ("Industrial growth
37 and development from 1870 to 1970 produced a wholesale upgrading of the occupational
38 structure to create a diamond-shaped status distribution that supported mass upward
39 mobility, rising income, and declining inequality; in contrast, the postindustrial trans-
40 formation since 1973 has produced an hourglass economic structure of high-paying jobs for the
41 well-educated, a dwindling number of middle-income jobs for the modestly schooled,
42 and many, many poorly paid jobs for those with little schooling."). For two hypotheses
43 about the mechanisms by which this happens, see Robert H. Frank and Phillip Cook, *The*
44 *Winner-Take-All Society* (New York: Free Press, 1995), and Tyler Cowen, *Average is Over*
45 (New York: Dutton, 2013).

46
47 ⁷⁵ Anderson seems to endorse a "diamond" structure in her "How Should Egalitarians
48 Cope with Market Risks?" *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 9, no. 1 (2008): 267 ("Egalitarians prefer
49 not just that income inequalities be limited at the top and bottom, but that individuals be
50 crowded in the middle of the distribution").

1 that prevents extreme dispersions from arising.⁷⁶ But if we either don't
 2 find that concern compelling or believe it only applies to extreme long-
 3 term dispersions, relational equality should be achievable, via relative
 4 mobility, in cases like *Mobile Entrepreneurs*, and in "hourglass" societies
 5 more generally. Note that relative mobility would still not be *sufficient* on
 6 its own for relational equality: relational equality also requires civic and
 7 political equality, topics which go beyond my scope here.
 8

9 *B. Can we have relational equality without relative mobility?*
 10

11 Reihan Salam and Alex Tabarrok have argued that society should aim
 12 to increase upward absolute mobility and should treat relative mobility as
 13 unimportant.⁷⁷ While absolute mobility can contribute to relational equality,
 14 relational equality requires relative mobility. We can only give up on rela-
 15 tive mobility if we are willing to give up on relational equality altogether.

16 As Tabarrok notes, upward absolute mobility is compatible with a
 17 complete lack of relative mobility.⁷⁸ But, as Friedman's observations sug-
 18 gest, it is hard to see how a rigidly stratified society without relative
 19 mobility could be compatible with relational equality. Upward absolute
 20 mobility can also be unequally distributed through the population, and
 21 can coexist with oppression and political inequality: society could enjoy
 22 upward absolute mobility even though its best-off members comprise an
 23 entrenched ruling class while those worse off advance only marginally.⁷⁹
 24 Finally, many types of absolute mobility — such as the substantial improve-
 25 ments in access to consumer appliances that Steven Horwitz emphasizes
 26
 27

28 ⁷⁶ A proposal to cap CEO pay at twelve times worker pay was considered and rejected
 29 recently in Switzerland, as discussed in John Sutter, "U.S. Should Copy Switzerland
 30 and Consider a 'Maximum Wage' Ratio, Too," *CNN*, November 11, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/11/21/opinion/sutter-swiss-executive-pay/>. For academic discussion of a
 31 range-constraint principle, see Douglas G. Bond and Jong-Chul Park, "Notions of Distribu-
 32 tive Justice: A Comparative, Empirical Test of Rawls' Theory of Justice in Korea and the
 33 United States," *Pacific Focus* 4, no. 1 (1989): 47–63, which reports support among Korean
 34 experimental participants for such a principle.

35 ⁷⁷ Reihan Salam, "Going Nowhere," *The Daily* (Nov. 19, 2011), <http://www.thedaily.com/page/2011/11/29/112911-opinions-column-mobility-salam-1-2/> ("When you think about
 36 it, achieving a high level of relative mobility isn't actually that attractive a goal. . . . We should
 37 instead focus on improving upward absolute mobility across the spectrum"); Alex Tabarrok,
 38 "Stasis, Churn, and Growth," *Marginal Revolution* (July 30, 2012) ("Growth has relative stasis,
 39 that is, there is no relative generational mobility. So now we come to the crux of the issue. . . .
 40 Do you want to add some Churn to Growth? Why? If there isn't much difference between Stasis
 41 and Churn then how can adding Churn to Growth make it better? It doesn't and that is why
 42 economic mobility measures are overrated. What we should care about is growth").

43 ⁷⁸ Tabarrok, *ibid.*

44 ⁷⁹ For empirical discussion of growing inequality, see Horwitz, this volume, ("Various
 45 measures of inequality seem to have gotten worse in the last few years, with a recent study
 46 indicating that over 95 percent of the income gains between 2009 and 2012 went to the top 1
 47 percent"). Horwitz speculates that this is due to government entanglement in the economy;
 48 for alternative explanations, see Cowen, *Average is Over*, and Frank and Cook, *The Winner-
 49 Take-All Society*.

1 in this volume — contribute only modestly to relational equality.⁸⁰ Absolute
 2 upward mobility could enable both Rich and Poor to own refrigerators
 3 without protecting Poor against rising child care expenses that block
 4 her career advancement,⁸¹ intrusive governance at work,⁸² and legislative
 5 enactments that cater only to Rich's interests,⁸³ all factors which preclude
 6 relational equality. (Although Horwitz notes that housing, health care,
 7 and educational expenses have risen, he does not discuss rises in child
 8 care or transportation expenses, nor does he discuss the shift from
 9 defined-benefit to defined-contribution pensions.⁸⁴)

10 The inability of upward absolute mobility — particularly upward absolute
 11 *consumption* mobility, on which Horwitz focuses — to secure relational
 12 equality on its own does not render it irrelevant. Poor people having refrigerators
 13 is a good thing; relational equality is not all that matters. But it
 14 does show that we need more than upward absolute mobility in order to
 15 achieve relational equality. We need civic and political equality, and we
 16 also need relative mobility. Anderson's version of relational equality, for
 17 example, explicitly requires mobility in and out of elite positions in society
 18 — that is, relative mobility.⁸⁵ The same is true for Satz's account.⁸⁶

19 Short-term egalitarians might raise a final question. Even if relative
 20 mobility is required for a society with elite positions, could a society with
 21

22 ⁸⁰ Horwitz, this volume, Table 4. The research by Hassett and Mathur on which Horwitz
 23 relies for the claim that consumption inequality between the better-off and worst-off is fairly
 24 low has been challenged in the literature. See Orazio Attanasio, Erik Hurst, and Luigi
 25 Pistaferri, "The Evolution of Income, Consumption, and Leisure Inequality in the US, 1980–
 26 2010" (National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. W17982), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w17982>.

27 ⁸¹ See Lynda Laughlin, *Who's Minding the Kids? Child Care Arrangements: Spring 2011* (2013):
 28 17, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p70-135.pdf>.

29 ⁸² See Anderson, "Equality and Freedom in the Workplace: Recovering Republican
 30 Insights," this volume.

31 ⁸³ See, for example, Thomas J. Hayes, "Responsiveness in an Era of Inequality: The Case
 32 of the U.S. Senate," *Political Research Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2012): 585–99; see also Horwitz, this
 33 volume ("[I]t should not surprise us that those who are wealthier might have better access
 34 to the political process and thus be more successful at getting it to channel resources in their
 35 direction").

36 ⁸⁴ For criticism of the claim that workers have enjoyed much upward absolute mobility, see
 37 Benjamin Landy, "Household Debt and Middle Class Stagnation," *The Century Foundation*
 38 *Blog* (Jan. 29, 2013), http://web.archive.org/web/20140110205400/http://www.tcf.org/work/social_insurance/detail/graph-household-debt-and-middle-class-stagnation.

39 ⁸⁵ Anderson, "How Should Egalitarians Cope with Market Risks?" 267–68, argues that "[e]
 40 galitarians prefer that there be constant circulation among the occupants of the top ranks of
 41 the distribution of income and wealth. A society in which the wealthy are self-perpetuating
 42 is a society with an insular class of the most advantaged, liable to see itself as set apart
 43 from and antagonistic to everyone else in society, and therefore liable to pressure the state to
 44 adopt policies that protect its superiority." Anderson also argues in her "Fair Opportunity
 45 in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective," *Ethics* 117, no. 4 (2007): 612, that "[a]n
 integrated elite is . . . more qualified to carry out its responsibilities than is a socially insular
 elite that is drawn overwhelmingly from the ranks of the multiply advantaged."

⁸⁶ Satz, "Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship," 637, ("A society whose leaders
 come narrowly from one social group will generally do a poor job in representing the interests of
 the diverse members of that society, interests about which they may have no real information").

1 strict short-term distributive equality and no elite positions — like those
 2 Gomberg and Sayer advocate — achieve relational equality without relative
 3 mobility? I do not think so. Relational — as opposed to distributive —
 4 equality seems to require democracy and civil society, which entail spe-
 5 cialization and hierarchy and therefore require relative mobility.

6 7 8 V. CONCLUSION

9 I have argued that, if we care about equality, we should care about
 10 mobility. And I have illustrated how different forms of mobility connect
 11 with different types of equality:

- 12
 13 (a) Relative mobility is a *proxy* for equality of opportunity. Although
 14 relative mobility is neither necessary nor sufficient for equality of
 15 opportunity, the two are correlated.
 16 (b) Relative mobility's relation to distributive equality is different:
 17 rather than being a *proxy* for distributive equality, it is a *contrib-*
 18 *utor* to distributive equality, because it can convert short-term
 19 equality into long-term distributive equality.
 20 (c) Relative mobility and absolute upward mobility are both contrib-
 21 utors to relational equality, although absolute upward mobility is
 22 not sufficient on its own to achieve relational equality.
 23

24 How might we promote the types of mobility that correlate with, or con-
 25 tribute to, equality? Some efforts — such as socioeconomic affirmative
 26 action policies — might serve to promote intergenerational relative
 27 mobility into and out of elite positions.⁸⁷ Others, such as policies incentiv-
 28 izing those currently poor to accumulate assets, would focus on mobility
 29 out of disadvantaged positions.⁸⁸

30 While much more work remains to be done in determining what values
 31 are at stake as we structure institutions, civil society, and informal indi-
 32 vidual life in ways that affect the frequency and magnitude of different
 33 types of mobility, I hope to at least have shown here that mobility's connec-
 34 tion to equality raises questions of normative interest for moral and political
 35 philosophers. Rather than focusing solely on *one-time* measures of resources
 36 or status — whether, for instance, people possess equal resources in a given
 37 year, or over a lifetime — we might do well to also attend to the normative
 38 relevance of *intertemporal* changes in the distribution of resources and status.
 39

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41
 42
 43 ⁸⁷ Kahlenberg discusses the connection between class-based affirmative action and socio-
 economic mobility in *The Remedy: Class, Race, and Affirmative Action*, 87–88.

44 ⁸⁸ Michael Sherraden, “Assets and Public Policy,” in *Inclusion in the American Dream: Assets,*
 45 *Poverty, and Public Policy* (Michael Sherraden ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).