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What is the Point of Egalitarian Social Relationships?*

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I Introduction

The subject matter of this essay is a certain understanding of the value of equality which I will call 'relational egalitarianism' – a view which locates the value of equality not in distributions but in social and political relationships.¹ This is a suitable topic for a contribution to a volume based on themes from the work of G.A. Cohen for (at least) two, somewhat contradictory, reasons.

The first is that Cohen was one of the leading proponents of certain view of distributive equality, which makes his work a target for relational egalitarians. Cohen was primarily a reactive philosopher, and it was through his engagement with the work of other great figures in contemporary political philosophy – Rawls, Nozick and Dworkin – that he himself became one.² Perhaps the *positive* thesis with which he has become most associated is the theory of distributive justice or fairness which Elizabeth Anderson aptly dubbed 'luck egalitarianism' (a label which Cohen wholeheartedly adopted).³ Cohen's most detailed exposition and defence of

* I am delighted to have been asked to contribute to this volume of essays in honour of G.A. Cohen. Aside from the deep philosophical debt that I, along with all other contemporary political philosophers, owe to Jerry, I am also indebted to him personally. I did not have the chance to get to know Jerry well on a personal level, but as a graduate student at Oxford (and one to whom Cohen had no special responsibilities) I found him to be helpful, encouraging, funny, (usefully) critical and generous. As an aspiring member of the political philosophical profession and community, this meant a great deal to me. I have benefitted from written comments from Christian Schemmel and Liam Shields, and from discussion with the Mancept group at the University of Manchester.

¹ In using 'relational egalitarianism' in this way, I am not using the terminology in the same way as it is employed by Andrea Sangiovanni, where 'relational' theories hold that 'the practice-mediated relations in which people stand to one another condition the content, scope, and justification' of principles of justice.' See Andrea Sangiovanni, 'Global Justice, Reciprocity and the State', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 35 (2007): 3-37, at 5. I am grateful to Simon Caney for alerting me to this different usage.

² Michael Otsuka writes: 'Cohen found himself – his philosophical bearings, his theoretical commitments, and his distinctive voice – through a remarkable series of engagements with the thoughts of others: not only Marx, but also his contemporaries Nozick, Dworkin, and Rawls. Through his engagement with them, he reached the same heights.' 'Editor's Preface' in G.A. Cohen, *Finding Oneself in the Other*, Michael Otsuka ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013): vii-xi, at p. xi.

³ The label originally appears in Elizabeth S. Anderson, 'What is the Point of Equality?', *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287-337. For Cohen's adoption of the label, see his *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 8.

that position was articulated in his 1989 essay ‘On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice’⁴, a paper that (characteristically) took as its launching pad opposition to Ronald Dworkin’s thesis that egalitarians should care about equality of resources.⁵ ‘On the Currency’ became Cohen’s most well-known, and commonly cited, article⁶ and he later called the luck egalitarian position his ‘animating conviction in political philosophy with respect to justice’. He described the position as follows: ‘an unequal distribution whose inequality cannot be vindicated by some choice or fault or desert on the part of (some of) the relevant affected agents is unfair, and therefore, *pro tanto*, unjust, and that nothing can remove that particular injustice.’⁷

This luck egalitarian thesis has been challenged from a variety of angles, and one of the most challenging attacks has come from relational egalitarians. These theorists agree that equality is an important political value, but regard it as one that is primarily concerned with social or political relationships, rather than distributions. Relational egalitarians such as Elizabeth Anderson and Samuel Scheffler have pressed specific arguments against the luck egalitarian position, including the presentation of cases where luck egalitarianism seems to get things wrong, or at least seems to give troubling answers. What animates their deeper resistance, however, is the claim that luck egalitarians have simply misunderstood the very basis of the value of equality – they have taken it to be a distributive ideal, whereas egalitarian distributions, so the relational egalitarians claim, can only have, at best, instrumental or derivative value or importance. What egalitarians should really value, respect, or take as their theoretical starting point, according to the relational egalitarians, are social relationships characterised by certain egalitarian features, such as equal respect and non-domination (or, at least, the absence of relationships characterised by inequalitarian features). Egalitarian distributions can only be valuable insofar as they help to promote, are expressions of, or are demanded by, these valuable or important egalitarian social relationships.

So, relational egalitarianism is an apt topic for this volume because relational egalitarianism sets itself up as a response and a challenge to the luck egalitarian view of equality, which was

⁴ G.A. Cohen, ‘On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice’, *Ethics* 99 (1989): 906-944. (Reprinted as ch.1 of his *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice, and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*, Michael Otsuka ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011). Chs. 2-6 of *On the Currency* also focus on Cohen’s luck egalitarianism.)

⁵ Ronald Dworkin, ‘What is Equality? Part II: Equality of Resources’ in *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 10 (1981): 283-345. (Reprinted as ch. 2 of his *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000)).

⁶ Michael Otsuka, ‘Editor’s Preface’ in Cohen, *On the Currency*: vii-xi, at p. viii.

⁷ Cohen, *Rescuing*, p. 7.

Cohen's 'animating conviction.' Somewhat in tension with that reason for focusing on relational egalitarianism is my second reason for focusing on it: Cohen arguably was a relational egalitarian. In his last book⁸, the slender *Why Not Socialism?*, Cohen wrote about two principles. The first was the familiar luck egalitarian principle, operating there under the label of 'socialist equality of opportunity', which is 'the egalitarian principle that *justice* endorses'.⁹ But he also wrote of a principle of community, saying "Community" can mean many things but the requirement of community that is central here is that people care about, and where necessary and possible, care for one another, and too, care that they care about one another."¹⁰ Cohen goes on to delineate two 'modes' of communal caring, one of which has independent distributive implications, as it 'curbs the inequalities that result from socialist equality of opportunity': 'We cannot enjoy full community, you and I, if you make, and keep, say, ten times as much money as I do [even if that is compatible with the luck egalitarian principle] because my life will then labor under challenges that you will never face'.¹¹ Since the other form of communal caring is noted to be 'not strictly required for equality'¹², we can take it, I think, that Cohen thinks the first mode of caring is necessary for equality. Socialist equality of opportunity (and thus justice) is not enough for true equality and sometimes will be at odds with it, it seems. Cohen concludes that justice and community may be incompatible moral ideals, but both form part of his egalitarianism.¹³ This principle of community looks quite similar to relational egalitarianism. Although the focus is on 'caring' rather than respect, recognition or anti-domination, it nevertheless condemns inequalities that are endorsed by luck egalitarianism in the name of another value – a value that tells us that it is better when we are able to recognise and empathise with one another's struggles; a value that tells us it is better when we live *as equals*. Further, late in his life, Cohen began to sketch some thoughts on what it is to regard and treat others as equals.¹⁴ Cohen's egalitarianism, then, clearly expanded beyond the distributive luck egalitarian principle. We should not be surprised by this. In 'On the Currency' Cohen had *focused* on accidental inequality, but had at the outset declared that 'the primary egalitarian impulse is to extinguish

⁸ That is, the last book published while Cohen was alive. Princeton University Press have posthumously published three further volumes of Cohen's work: *On the Currency*; *Finding Oneself in the Other*; and *Lectures on the History of Moral and Political Philosophy*, Jonathan Wolff ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁹ G.A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 13. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁴ G.A. Cohen, 'Notes on Regarding People as Equals' in his *Finding Oneself in the Other*.

the influence on distribution of *both exploitation and brute luck*.¹⁵ So, Cohen always saw equality as more than just luck-neutralized distributions, and the things that he sought to place alongside it – anti-exploitation, community, regarding others as equals – focused on the ways in which we treat one another and live together.

So, relational egalitarianism responds to and rejects Cohen's view of equality, but Cohen is also possibly a member of the relational egalitarian fold – it is a (less than fully articulated) element of his view. These are my, somewhat contradictory, two reasons for focusing on the relational view of equality in this essay.

Cohen may not have fully articulated or defended his principle of community, but relational egalitarianism has been expounded and defended by several philosophers in recent years. These theorists have variously referred to themselves as democratic egalitarians¹⁶, relational egalitarians¹⁷, and non-intrinsic egalitarians¹⁸, and include philosophers such as Elizabeth Anderson, T.M. Scanlon, Samuel Scheffler, Martin O'Neill and Christian Schemmel. All these theorists share a suspicion of luck egalitarianism's focus on distributive equality as important in and of itself. They seek a firmer basis for thinking distributive equality valuable or to be pursued (if indeed it is), and see the foundations of equality as importantly different. Thus, Anderson's question is 'What is the Point of Equality?', seeking to uncover the foundations of a commitment to equality. What lies at the root of our egalitarian concern? For luck egalitarians, the aim is to compensate unchosen or undeserved bad luck. For relational egalitarians, according to Anderson at least, the negative aim is to end oppression, whilst the positive aim is to 'create a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others.'¹⁹

In some ways, relational egalitarianism has (in the spirit of Cohen) been a reactive project. The central articles in which it is articulated are critiques of luck egalitarianism²⁰, or distributive

¹⁵ Cohen, 'On the Currency', 908. My emphasis. For an examination of the anti-exploitation element of Cohen's thinking on distributive justice, see Michael Otsuka, 'Justice as Fairness: Luck Egalitarian, not Rawlsian', *Journal of Ethics* 14 (2010): 217-230.

¹⁶ Anderson, 'What is the Point?'; Elizabeth S. Anderson, 'Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective', *Ethics* 117 (2007): 595-622.

¹⁷ Christian Schemmel, 'Why Relational Egalitarians Should Care About Distributions', *Social Theory and Practice* 37 (2011): 365-390.

¹⁸ Martin O'Neill, 'What Should Egalitarians Believe?', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36 (2008): 119-156.

¹⁹ Anderson, 'What is the Point?', 289.

²⁰ Anderson, 'What is the Point?'; Samuel Scheffler, 'What is Egalitarianism?', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 31 (2003): 5-39.

egalitarianism²¹, or, in Scheffler's case, a denial of a story in which luck egalitarianism has a fully Rawlsian heritage.²² In reply, luck egalitarians have often focussed on the fact that some relational egalitarians appear to have taken the luck egalitarian principle to be a principle of social policy, to be applied directly and without compromise, rather than an articulation of a single *pro tanto* moral value among a plurality.²³

In this paper I do not seek to defend (at least directly) luck or distributive egalitarianism. Rather I want to do three things. My first aim is to press the same kind of question that relational egalitarians press on luck egalitarians (and distributive egalitarians more generally) back on to relational egalitarians themselves. Luck egalitarians tell us that equal distributions are important, and relational egalitarians ask them to think about *why* they're important – what kind of value do they have?; what is the *point* of equality?; what lies at the root of the egalitarian concern? The relational egalitarians tell us that egalitarian social relationships lie at the heart of a concern with equality. But we can (and should) then ask relational egalitarians: why should we think *these relationships* morally important or valuable?

Explaining the value or importance of egalitarian social relationships, or what *kind* of value or importance they are thought to hold, has not played a central role in the articulation of relational theories of equality.²⁴ But when relational egalitarians *have* sought to explain the value of, reasons for fostering, or reasons for regarding as morally fundamental, such relationships, interestingly theorists who have broadly agreed with, and identified with, one another in their rejection of distributive egalitarianism and in embracing an understanding of equality founded in social and political relationships have offered strikingly different answers.²⁵

²¹ O'Neill, 'What Should Egalitarians Believe?'

²² Scheffler, 'What is Egalitarianism?'

²³ See, for example, Cohen, *Rescuing*, p. 271. For a more detailed response that revolves around this theme, see Alexander Brown, 'Luck Egalitarianism and Democratic Equality', *Ethical Perspectives* 12 (2005): 293-340.

²⁴ For example, the central articulations of the view are often taken to be Anderson's 'What is the Point?' and Scheffler's 'What is Egalitarianism?', neither of which focuses primarily on why, or in what way, egalitarian relationships are to be thought valuable or important.

²⁵ Christian Schemmel is rare in explicitly acknowledging the differing foundations of relational egalitarian views, dividing the terrain between wholly justice-based views of social equality and non-wholly-justice-based views ('Why Relational Egalitarians Should Care About Distributions', 366-367). As I shall later make clear, I think the distinction Schemmel has in mind is the one I draw between normative and evaluative views.

This shows, importantly, that there is not one body of thought, ‘relational egalitarianism’, but rather a plurality of relational egalitarianisms that differ in their most fundamental beliefs – their beliefs about why equality in social and political relationships is important, and this then leads to potential differences concerning how we should distribute, promote or respect that kind of value. This is important because we often think of these thinkers as closely aligned, and they have by and large been happy to align themselves with one another. In one sense, rightly so: they do, of course, hold similar views on how we should view the value of equality and on the importance of certain kinds of relationships. But, as I try to show here, they appear to differ on why, or in what way, these relationships matter.

My second aim, in exposing these differing potential foundations for relational egalitarianism, is to show how the position may be vulnerable to similar worries that are expressed about distributive egalitarianism. Relational egalitarianism may well be, at the fundamental level, either distributive or abstract, which are two of the criticisms that relational egalitarians have laid at the door of distributive egalitarians.

Finally, I want to show how once we have a handle on what kind of value or importance egalitarian relationships are thought to have, realise or promote, it can be shown that relational egalitarianism(s) are compatible with distributive egalitarianism. Therefore, the distributive vs. relational dichotomy in the literature on equality is overblown: we are being asked to choose when we don’t necessarily need to. I don’t deny that relational egalitarians tell us something important, but I suggest that we may be able to house certain versions of the relational position *within* or *alongside* more familiar distributive theories, such as maximisation, sufficiency, priority and, crucially, distributive equality. For example, one particularly persuasive view of relational egalitarianism – the personal value view – seems to be operating on almost entirely distinct ground from distributive egalitarianism, and seems to me to require or presuppose a distributive view. Exactly how relational and distributive egalitarianism may be combined will differ according to how the value or importance of relational equality is explained, but each variant may offer some room for distributive egalitarianism.

II Relational Egalitarianism

In this section I will lay out the relational egalitarian view, and some of the reasons that its adherents believe it to be superior to distributive views of equality. In particular, I will

emphasise two (related) worries about distributive equality: that it is overly ‘arithmetic’ or pattern-focused; and that it is overly abstract – under-motivated and mysterious. I will then, in the following section, examine some statements that various relational egalitarians have made that seem to point toward differing answers that relational egalitarians have given to our title question, and will group them according to what *type* of value or importance social equality is thought to have.

The central thought of relational egalitarians, as I have said, is that the value of equality is not, fundamentally, about distributing goods: what matters is the quality of social relationships that people have. As T.M. Scanlon puts it, the ideal is of a society in which people all regard one another as equals, and this ideal has, according to Scanlon, ‘played a more important role in radical egalitarian thinking than the idea of distributive justice which dominates much discussion of equality in our time.’²⁶ According to Martin O’Neill, our reasons for affirming the importance of equality can ‘best be understood as elements that together constitute a complex background picture of how people should live together as equals.’²⁷ Samuel Scheffler writes: ‘Equality, as it is more commonly understood, is not, in the first instance, a distributive ideal, and its aim is not to compensate for misfortune. It is, instead, a moral ideal governing the relations in which people stand to one another.’²⁸ Elizabeth Anderson argues that ‘egalitarians should aim at ending oppressive social relations (which are inherently relations of inequality) and at realizing society conceived as a system of cooperation and affiliation among equals.’²⁹ She also says that ‘Certain patterns in the distribution of goods may be instrumental to securing such [egalitarian] relationships, follow from them, or even be constitutive of them. But democratic egalitarians are fundamentally concerned with the relationships within which goods are distributed, not only with the distribution of goods themselves.’³⁰

Some of the complaints that relational egalitarians make about distributive equality focus on its fundamentally distributive nature, and (relatedly) its abstraction. O’Neill complains that when distributive inequality is seen as, in and of itself, regrettable, ‘the ideal of equality can

²⁶ T.M. Scanlon, ‘The Diversity of Objections to Inequality’ in Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams eds., *The Ideal of Equality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002): 41-49, at p. 43. For further reflections on the historical pedigree of this kind of thinking, see Christopher Brooke, ‘A Short History of Non-intrinsic Egalitarianism from Hobbes to Rousseau’ (unpublished m/s).

²⁷ O’Neill, ‘What Should Egalitarians Believe?’, 125.

²⁸ Scheffler, ‘What is Egalitarianism?’, 21.

²⁹ Elizabeth Anderson, ‘Expanding the Egalitarian Toolbox: Equality and Bureaucracy’ in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, Volume LXXXII (2008), 143.

³⁰ Anderson, ‘What is the Point?’, 313-314.

seem unduly *obscure* and *abstract*: as a merely *arithmetic* goal, the value of which it is impossible to grasp.³¹ He also alleges that ‘On the Telic [egalitarian] view...the ideal of equality can seem merely *arithmetic*, instead of being a properly intelligible political value. It is difficult to understand why this ‘merely arithmetic’ idea of equality should be so important³² and that this ‘merely arithmetic’ nature ‘undermines its intuitive appeal, and makes it *excessively abstract* and *mysterious* as a distributive view.’³³ In a similar vein T.M. Scanlon alleges that ‘Opponents of equality seem most compelling when they portray equality as a *peculiarly abstract* goal – *conformity to a pattern* – to which special moral value is attached.’³⁴ According to Anderson, ‘When we reconceive equality as fundamentally a social relationship rather than a pattern of distribution, we do not abandon distributive concerns. Rather, we give such concerns a *rationale*.’³⁵

We can draw two themes from these criticisms of distributive views of equality: that they are *at root* distributive theories, concerned with patterns and not people; and that they are abstract, mysterious and strange – they do not connect with people’s lives or concerns.

III Why are Egalitarian Social Relationships Valuable?

Let us now turn our attention to asking relational egalitarians our title question: what is the point of egalitarian social relationships? As we have seen, for relational egalitarians, we must aim to promote, or respect, egalitarian social relationships (or, at least, to avoid inegalitarian social relationships). But why should we promote these egalitarian relationships (or absence of inegalitarian relationships) or take such relationships to be morally foundational? What is good (or bad) about them?

In the previous paragraph I have made various parenthetical qualifications. These all focus our attention on whether relational egalitarians seek to make a *positive* claim or a *negative* one. The positive one would be that egalitarian social relationships are in some way *important*, *good* or *to be promoted*. The negative one would be that inegalitarian social relationships are in some way *bad* or *to be avoided*. These claims may sound equivalent, but they are not. Consider a person who is in an inegalitarian relationship. This is bad, or to be rectified, on either view. But we can end the inegalitarian relationship in two ways – by ending the

³¹ O’Neill, ‘What Should Egalitarians Believe?’, 124. Emphases a mixture of original and added.

³² Ibid., 139. Emphasis in original.

³³ Ibid., 140. My emphases.

³⁴ Scanlon, ‘The Diversity of Objections to Equality’, p. 42. My emphases.

³⁵ Anderson, ‘Expanding the Egalitarian Toolbox’, 143. My emphasis.

relationship, or by making it egalitarian. Holding all else fixed (such as the person's non-relationship-based welfare) the negative view gives us no reason to prefer one response to the other – what is important is ending the inegalitarian relationship. The positive view, however, would much prefer that we make the relationship egalitarian. I think this is worth mentioning because it is often unclear which view relational egalitarians have in mind. In general statements of the position they will often focus our minds on equal social relationships and their importance, but in their arguments they will often focus on the *badness* of inegalitarian social relations.³⁶ Perhaps this is because relational egalitarians start from the factual premise that there will be social relationships either way, and so the only way to make sure that there are no inegalitarian relationships is to make relationships egalitarian. For example, Elizabeth Anderson takes as her fundamental starting point the ideal of a democratic state, writing:

‘In liberal democratic versions of social contract theory, the fundamental aim of the state is to secure the liberty of its members. Since the democratic state is nothing more than citizens acting collectively, it follows that the fundamental obligation of citizens to one another is to secure the social conditions of everyone’s freedom... [Democratic egalitarianism] claims that the social condition of living a free life is that one stand in relations of equality with others.’³⁷

Given this starting point, in which we begin with the *idea of society (and state)*, it may be that there is nothing but scholastic hairsplitting at issue between the positive and negative thesis – we are going to have social relationships, so we just need to decide whether we want egalitarian or inegalitarian ones. This may be so, but nevertheless, for reasons theoretical clarity, I would be interested to know what really animates the relational egalitarian: is it that we should want and try to ensure that egalitarian social relationships (and thus social relationships) exist; or is it that we should seek to eradicate the badness of inegalitarian relations, and be indifferent as to whether or not social relationships exist? This may not matter only as a matter of theoretical clarity. For example, the views will possibly differ on who exactly is harmed by inegalitarian social relationships. On the negative view, it is possible that only the oppressed are harmed, and they should be the locus of our concern. On the positive view, where egalitarian social relationships are valuable, if they are valuable because they make lives go better, then both oppressed and oppressors are harmed by inegalitarian

³⁶ See, for example, Scanlon, ‘The Diversity of Objections to Inequality’, who seems entirely focussed on the badness of inegalitarian relationships, but makes a positive general statement. An exception to this is Martin O’Neill, ‘What Should Egalitarians Believe?’, who, I think, makes it clear that he supports the positive view, believing fraternal relationships to be valuable.

³⁷ Anderson, ‘What is the Point?’, 314-315.

relationships. In addition, the views may differ as to how they direct us beyond the confines of our existing communities. If egalitarian social relationships are good, perhaps we ought to go out beyond our communities and form more. If inegalitarian social relationships are simply bad, however, we should merely ensure not to form new inegalitarian relationships, but we will have no special reason to go out and form new egalitarian ones.

However, I am going to set aside such concerns here. I will generally focus what it is that is thought to be valuable or important about egalitarian social relationships, even though answers to this question will often focus on what is disvaluable or elimination-worthy about inegalitarian relationships. In other words, I accept the reasonable assumption that there will *be* social relationships, so the question is how they should look, and why. Before turning to what some relational egalitarians have said about this issue, it will be worth making some distinctions between different kinds of claims in moral and political theory. The first is between a normative and evaluative claim. Normative claims concern what we ought (not) to do; evaluative claims about what would make things better (or worse). Consequentialists seek to make all normative claims in terms of evaluative ones, but not everyone is a consequentialist. The second and third distinctions are within the category of evaluative claims. They are cross-cutting, so the category 'evaluative claims' can be seen as a two-by-two matrix. Along one axis the distinction is made between instrumental and intrinsic value – things are instrumentally valuable when they promote something of intrinsic value; intrinsically valuable things are valuable in and of themselves. Along the other axis is the distinction between impersonal and personal value. Something is personally valuable if it is good because it is good *for* someone. Happiness is a personal value – it is valuable (if it is) because it is good for someone. Impersonal values are not good *for* anyone; they are just good. Telic egalitarians see equality as being, or as serving, an impersonal value. In punishment theory, retributivists see deserved punishment as having impersonal value.³⁸ Both distributive equality and punishment are seen as (in one way) good, even when they're not good *for* anyone.

Let us now turn to what relational egalitarians have said about why and in what way the relationships they favour are important, valuable or worthy of promotion. Doing so will

³⁸ On both equality and retributive justice, see Larry S. Temkin, 'Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection' in Clayton and Williams eds., *The Ideal of Equality*: 126-161. On retributive justice as an impersonal value, see my 'Retributivists! The Harm Principle is not for you!' in *Ethics* 124 (2014): 272-298.

involve quoting them at length, as their answers are often complex. The problem, as Samuel Scheffler sees it, is as follows:

‘the basic reason it [equality] matters to us is because we believe that there is something valuable about human relationships that are, in certain crucial respects at least, unstructured by differences of rank, power or status. So understood, equality is in some ways a puzzling value and a difficult one to interpret. ... [I]n order to understand the value of equality, one needs to investigate the specific respects in which egalitarian relationships must be free from regimentation by considerations of rank or status. One needs to characterize in greater detail the special value that egalitarian relationships are thought to have and to consider which differences of authority or status have the capacity to compromise that value.’³⁹

Many relational egalitarian writings seem to claim that egalitarian relationships have *personal value* – they’re good for the people involved (or, negatively, inegalitarian social relationships are bad for the people involved). For example, consider the following passages. Scheffler says that one reason we may take such relationships to be valuable is that, collectively, we think they are – the idea of equal citizenship is implicit in the public political culture of modern democratic society, and as such represents a point of normative convergence.⁴⁰ However, he also offers a more ‘philosophically venturesome’ account of what makes egalitarian social relationships valuable, which puts the focus firmly on the value of such relationships to individual lives:

‘[L]iving in a society of equals is good *both intrinsically and instrumentally*. When the relationships among a society’s members are structured by rigid hierarchical distinctions, [this account] claims, the resulting patterns of deference and privilege exert a stifling effect on human freedom and inhibit the possibilities of human exchange. Because of the profound and formative influence of basic political institutions, moreover, patterns of deference and privilege that are politically entrenched spill over into personal relationships of all kinds. They distort people’s attitudes toward themselves, undermining the self-respect of some and encouraging an insidious sense of superiority in others. Furthermore, social hierarchies require stabilizing and sustaining myths, and the necessity of perpetuating and enforcing these myths discourages truthful relations among people and makes genuine self-

³⁹ Samuel Scheffler, ‘Choice, Circumstance and the Value of Equality’, *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 4 (2005): 5-28, at 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

understanding more difficult to achieve. In all of these ways, inegalitarian societies *compromise human flourishing*; they limit personal freedom, corrupt human relationships, undermine self-respect and inhibit truthful living. ...[Whereas] an egalitarian society helps to *promote the flourishing* of its citizens...[and] to live in society as an equal is a good thing in its own right.’⁴¹

Scanlon writes:

“it is an evil for people to be treated as inferior, or made to feel inferior’... [This] statement of this objection [to inegalitarian social relationships] was cautiously ambivalent. It consisted of two parts, the first of which suggests that what is objectionable is a certain form of treatment (being *treated* as inferior, or not being ‘treated as an equal’) and the second suggests that the evil is an experiential one (being made to *feel* inferior). More needs to be said about how this ‘experiential’ component is to be understood and about how it is supposed to be related to the underlying forms of treatment in order to give rise to the objection in question.

The experiential evil involved here can be characterized in several different ways – indeed, there are several different kinds of experience that one might have in mind. Let me distinguish two broad categories. The first, more ‘individualistic’, characterization emphasizes what might be called *damage to individuals’ sense of self-worth*...The second category emphasizes damages to the bonds between people: what might be called the loss of fraternity...Unlike the first, this is a loss *suffered* by the better off and worse off alike.’⁴²

Elizabeth Anderson also suggests that the value of non-oppressive social relationships to individual lives is at the foundation of her commitment to relational equality:

‘To be subject to another’s command *threatens one’s interests*, as those in command are liable to serve themselves at the expense of their sub-ordinates. It threatens subordinates’ autonomy, their standing as self-governing individuals. Without substantial controls on the content of legitimate commands, subjection can also be degrading and humiliating...Such a condition of subjection to the arbitrary wills of others is objectionable in itself, and has further objectionable consequences: timidity

⁴¹ Ibid., 19. My emphases.

⁴² Scanlon, ‘The Diversity of Objections to Inequality’, p. 51. Emphases a mixture of original and added.

and self-censorship in the presence of superiors – or worse, grovelling and self-abasement.’⁴³

Later in the same paper, Anderson states that, ‘the quest for freedom is the quest for a mode of relating to others in which no one is dominated, in which each adult meets every other adult member of society eye to eye, as an equal.’⁴⁴ And, as we have already seen, she argues that ‘In liberal democratic versions of social contract theory, the fundamental aim of the state is to secure the liberty of its members... [Democratic egalitarianism] claims that the social condition of living a free life is that one stand in relations of equality with others.’ Here egalitarian relationships appear to be important because they are necessary for freedom. It is implied, further, that freedom is good for people, or necessary for people’s good. That freedom is an intrinsic or instrumental personal good is implied by Anderson’s appeal to ‘social contract theory’, since in such theories the things that people pursue (primary goods, security etc.) are the things that will help them lead good lives.

Martin O’Neill writes:

‘The reasons to which Non-Intrinsic egalitarianism appeals are themselves generated by distinctively egalitarian concerns with the badness of servility, exploitation, domination, and differences in status. The badness of these outcomes can best be understood by virtue of the contrasting value of certain kinds of fraternal, egalitarian social relations. The existence of these kinds of social relations should itself be seen as intrinsically valuable, independent of the positive effects that such relations may have for individual welfare.’⁴⁵

O’Neill attaches a footnote to this text, in which he adds: ‘Recall that, as Parfit puts it, “we may think it *bad for people* if they are servile or too deferential, even if this does not frustrate their desires, or affect their experienced wellbeing”’.⁴⁶

⁴³ Anderson, ‘Expanding the Egalitarian Toolbox’, 145-146. My emphasis.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁵ O’Neill, ‘What Should Egalitarians Believe?’, 130.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 130, n. 30. My emphasis. I have included this quotation of the footnote because from O’Neill’s main text, one could suppose that he meant to say that egalitarian social relationships have *impersonal* value, and are therefore intrinsically valuable not only aside from experiential welfare considerations, but also aside from considerations of human flourishing or wellbeing altogether. O’Neill does, as we shall see, think that egalitarian social relationships could have impersonal value, but I don’t think that is what he is arguing here: the Parfit quotation, while keeping our focus away from *experienced* wellbeing, maintains that servility and deference are *bad for* people.

What all these statements concerning the value of equality in social relationships have in common is that they all seem to assert that egalitarian social relationships are good *for* people – or at least that inegalitarian social relationships are bad *for* people. That is to say, they all seem to assert that egalitarian social relationships have *personal* value. However, notice that divisions are already beginning to show between different relational egalitarians. A lot of reasons for thinking egalitarian social relationships valuable, and inegalitarian ones bad, are mentioned in the above statements. In particular, Anderson and O’Neill throw our gaze on the dominated or oppressed, arguing that being dominated and oppressed is bad for us. Scheffler and Scanlon, however, whilst not ignoring the plight of the oppressed, are more open to the possibility that inegalitarian relationships are bad for both sides (since they ‘inhibit truthful living’ and our understanding of ourselves, and mean a ‘loss of fraternity’). Of course, it doesn’t show much to show that different thinkers focus on different aspects of the badness of inequality – shock! philosophers may disagree with one another! – but it is worth highlighting, because these thinkers have largely been happy to associate themselves with one another’s work⁴⁷, and will easily be associated with each other by others, due to the closeness of their views in certain ways, and the fact that the way in which their views cohere (an emphasis on social relationships rather than distributions) has been the focus of their writings, whilst the areas where they seem to differ (their foundational reasons for believing egalitarian relationships to matter) has not. The reality, however, is that while there is agreement at the level of the rejection of distributive egalitarianism and the broad reasons why, there appears to be disagreement about what values and principles ultimately underpin the position.

In addition, whilst there appears to be agreement in the above statements that egalitarian social relationships are good *for* people, there is little agreement or clarity over whether such relationships have intrinsic or instrumental value to us. Scheffler explicitly says they have both, but does not delineate which of the reasons he gives are instrumental and which intrinsic, nor does he explain what the intrinsic values served by (if instrumental) or instantiated in (if intrinsic) these relationships are. All we get is an assurance that such relationships promote ‘human flourishing’ (leaving us in no doubt that the value is personal), but it is left entirely unclear whether, say, ‘truthful living’ is to be thought of as instrumental to a good life; a distinct, *sui generis* form of human flourishing; or directly contributing to

⁴⁷ Scheffler identifies his critique with Anderson’s (‘Choice, Circumstance and the Value of Equality’, 25, n.7), whilst O’Neill identifies his theory closely with Scanlon (‘What Should Egalitarians Believe?’, 122, 126, 130, 132, 133, 139), and, to a lesser degree, with Anderson and Scheffler (130). Schemmel identifies his view with Anderson and Scheffler (‘Why Relational Egalitarians Should Care About Distributions’, 365).

some more ultimate human good, like happiness (i.e., not instrumental to human happiness, but constitutive of it). Anderson, however, seems to see egalitarian social relationships as largely instrumentally valuable. Inegalitarian relationships are disvaluable because they ‘threaten one’s interests’ (although she also says that subjection is ‘objectionable in itself’). Furthermore, egalitarian relationships are valuable because they are necessary for *freedom*, which appears to be the ultimate good we are seeking to provide in Anderson’s architectonic.⁴⁸

Scanlon, like Scheffler, seems to see a mix of intrinsic and instrumental value. The disvalue of inegalitarian relationships for those at the bottom is the loss of self-respect – making inegalitarian relationships instrumentally disvaluable – whilst fraternal social relations seem to be held up as intrinsically valuable, part of the good life.

However, not all relational egalitarians have seen the value of egalitarian social relationships as personal (instrumentally or intrinsically). Martin O’Neill posits that such relationships may be *impersonally* valuable – not valuable because they are good for people, but valuable because they are good in and of themselves (even when they actually make people’s lives go worse). In his discussion of Parfit’s well-known ‘levelling down objection’⁴⁹, O’Neill considers a case of two distributions:

- (1) Half at 100, Half at 150
- (2) Everyone at 99⁵⁰

The levelling-down objection is that telic egalitarians would have to say that (2) is in some way better even though everyone is worse off, which, so the objection claims, is implausible.

O’Neill sides with the telic egalitarian here, saying that the relational or non-intrinsic egalitarian should agree that (2) could be in some way better. He writes:

‘Distribution (1) might represent an affluent but class-ridden society, marked by forms of servility, domination, and exploitation. The Non-Intrinsic Egalitarian should think it in one way preferable to move from such a society to a more egalitarian society (as in (2)) even if this adversely affected each person’s level of all-things-considered well-being. This is because the Non-Intrinsic egalitarian can allow that certain kinds of egalitarian social relations have a value that is not reducible to the effects on individual

⁴⁸ See also, ‘What is the Point?’, 289: ‘Democratic equality guarantees all law-abiding citizens effective access to the social conditions of their freedom at all times.’

⁴⁹ Derek Parfit, ‘Equality or Priority?’ in Clayton and Williams ed., *The Ideal of Equality*: 81-125, at p. 98

⁵⁰ In O’Neill, ‘What Should Egalitarians Believe?’, 141, these are numbered (3) and (4). In the quotation that follows, I have substituted my numbers for his.

welfare that those social relations may have. ...This may sound counterintuitive, but such a position is not at all mysterious. If we think that certain egalitarian values have a significance that is independent of the effects of equality on individual well-being, then we may think that the value of equality can sometimes trump the value of maximizing (or a fortiori of merely increasing) well-being.⁵¹

Recall that, at the outset, I distinguished between normative and evaluative claims. So far we have looked at why egalitarian social relationships may be thought to be valuable, personally or impersonally. And, of course, some normative claims may piggy-back on those values. But egalitarian social relationships can also be understood in a more purely normative light – not as valuable per se, but rather as fundamentally morally important, as a starting point for normative claims. This way of looking at egalitarian social relationships doesn't see them as something to be promoted, a kind of value, but rather as a methodological starting point. Principles of justice, on this view, are expressions of or proceed from our fundamental commitment to social equality. Christian Schemmel offers such an account of the importance of egalitarian social relationships. He finds O'Neill's view that egalitarian relationships are impersonally valuable 'mysterious'⁵² (which is, of course, exactly what O'Neill accuses distributive views of being, and exactly what he denies his claims as being) and proposes a view in which:

'Relational egalitarianism...is a view about social justice; its aim is to specify rights and duties that individuals have as members of society, and which normally override other social values...The objection to [inegalitarian] relationships is not merely that they are, in some sense, bad for people, but that they constitute *unjust treatment*: domination involves subjection to the arbitrary exercise of power on the part of somebody else; marginalization involves an unjust denial of opportunities to participate in basic social and political institutions.'⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid., 141-142. See also, 146: '[W]e may believe that the sort of fraternal, egalitarian social relations that result from distributive equality are valuable in some way that is simply irreducible to any gain for, or benefit to, any particular individual. We may believe that such relationships have a basic moral significance that is not exhausted by their value *for* any particular individual.' Emphasis in original.

⁵² Christian Schemmel, 'Relational Egalitarian Distributions' (unpublished m/s). This paper later became 'Why Relational Egalitarians Should Care About Distributions', but this particular passage was deleted. I don't believe that this amendment reflected a change of heart in the author on this issue, however.

⁵³ Schemmel, 'Why Relational Egalitarians Should Care About Distributions', 366. In this quotation Schemmel seems focussed on the negative view – the justice-based imperative is to end inegalitarian relationships, not produce egalitarian ones.

Schemmel gives credence to the idea that what is disvaluable about inegalitarian relationships is their *personal* disvalue – they make people’s lives go worse. However, he also has a deeper commitment to such egalitarian relationships. We should care about such relationships ‘not merely’ because they make peoples lives go better but because they are required by justice *even when (in an individual instance⁵⁴) they don’t make people’s lives go better*. Unlike O’Neill, this is not because they are thought to be impersonally valuable. It is, rather, that they are *required*, and not in a way that feeds of their personal or impersonal value. Thus, the foundations of Schemmel’s relational egalitarianism are different from the personal value and impersonal value views that we have thus far considered. Rather, his relational egalitarianism is, at root, normative. Ensuring egalitarian social relationships is something we ought to *do*, but not because (or at least not only *when*) they’re *good* (either for people or impersonally).

Anderson also makes comments along these lines. She says, for example, that ‘Egalitarians base claims to social and political equality on the fact of universal moral equality...egalitarians seek a social order in which persons stand in relations of equality.’⁵⁵ She also says, as we have seen, that distributive patterns should not be seen *purely as instrumental* to egalitarian social and political relationships, but may *follow from* or be *demande*d by them. This seems to put these relationships at the apex of the normative tree – it isn’t (just) that we should explain why they make people’s lives go well, it is, rather, that we should start from these relationships as the appropriate way to live together. We should have equal social relationships because, morally, we *are* equal.

As we have seen, in his writings on equality, Scanlon seems to appeal to personal value or personal reasons in articulating why we should care about egalitarian relationships. But, whilst in the works in which he defends relational egalitarianism he does not link back to his broader moral theory⁵⁶, and in his most famous work in moral theory (*What We Owe to Each Other*⁵⁷) he is ‘coy’ about what his contractualism demands in the sphere of distributive justice⁵⁸, we know, of course, that Scanlon has a broader methodological framework and deeper

⁵⁴ I am grateful to Schemmel for encouraging me to make this paranthetical qualification – he would not endorse the view that such relationships are morally important in a world where they are *in general* bad for people.

⁵⁵ Anderson, ‘What is the Point?’, 313.

⁵⁶ Aaron James says that Scanlon’s contractualism is ‘at best peripheral to his political essays.’ Aaron James, ‘The Significance of Distribution’ in R. Jay Wallace, Rahul Kumar, and Samuel Freeman eds., *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 276-304, at p. 296, n.1.

⁵⁷ T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1998).

⁵⁸ James, ‘The Significance of Distribution’, p. 276.

commitments: contractualism based on mutual justification and reasonable rejection. At the root of Scanlon's contractualism, we find something very like relational equality – an ideal of people living together in a justificatory community, where they live by principles that nobody could reasonably reject. At the summit of Scanlon's theory appears to be an idea that what matters is living together as equals. As Aaron James puts it, 'If Scanlon's theory implies that distributions, as such, are not what ultimately matters, it also tells us what *is* finally at stake: the significance of distribution depends on independently valuable relations among people. We are to treat others as they are owed, by acting only in ways we could justify to them, because this sustains a valuable 'relation of mutual recognition' with them.'⁵⁹ Thus, Scanlon's demand that we foster egalitarian relationships through our distributions may *immediately* be justified with reference to individual wellbeing, but *ultimately* the justification may, if we connect it with his contractualism, find its termination in a moral ideal of equality and equal relationships – what we owe to each other is what we can justify to one another, and we ought to justify ourselves to one another because only then can we live together as equals. James talks about justificatory equality as 'independently *valuable*', so there may still be digging to do (what *kind* of value is this? presumably impersonal?), but it may just be that Scanlon thinks that all moral and political philosophy must proceed from an idea of us as equals.

This normative formulation of relational egalitarianism sees the idea of egalitarian social and political relations as foundational. The point of equality, to use Anderson's terms, is to end oppression. Oppression is objectionable because the oppressor doesn't treat the oppressed as an equal. What is the point of treating a person as an equal? There isn't a point. It's just what we're supposed to *do*: we should treat each other as equals because we *are* equals. On this view, political theory must *proceed* from the ideal of relational equality, not explain why or how it is valuable or important.

IV Relational and Distributive Egalitarianism

In this section I want to turn my attention to my second and third aims as stated in the introduction. That is, I want to look at whether relational egalitarianism, in the various guises outlined above, can be criticized in the same way that distributive egalitarianism is criticized – as 'arithmetic' and 'abstract' – and to see how it might relate to distributive egalitarianism, to see whether there is room for both understandings of equality within a single view, as Cohen appeared to believe. We saw earlier how relational egalitarians have complained that

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 277, quoting Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 162. Emphasis in original.

distributive views of equality are overly abstract or mysterious, and that they are overly arithmetic, focusing on, as an earlier relational egalitarian, R.H. Tawney, put it, 'the details of the counting house'.⁶⁰ We have also seen, broadly speaking, three different ways of viewing egalitarian social relationships. Relational egalitarians claim that equality is a value that is centrally concerned with our social relationships. These relationships may have personal value (be good for people), have impersonal value (be good regardless of their contribution to individual lives), or be required by, or a starting point for theorizing about, justice. Any of these ways of understanding why we should care about egalitarian social and political relationships, I will now argue, is in danger of either lead us to a distributive or 'arithmetical' view, or is abstract. Furthermore, each is compatible, in some way, with distributive egalitarianism. Therefore, it may be a false dichotomy to make us choose between the relational and distributive understandings of equality.

Let's take the personal value view first. On this view, the basic claim is that egalitarian social relationships make people's lives go better (and makes them go better in the kind of way that egalitarians should care about). I think this is true. Consider two worlds in which all have equal holdings (and their level of holdings is the same in both worlds). In the first, everyone participates on an equal footing and relationships are characterized by healthy fraternal relations. In the other, two groups take it in turn to dominate and oppress one another. It seems to me that the people in the first world have better lives than those in the second.

One question we may ask is how 'perfectionist' this makes the relational egalitarian position. Many of the forms of wellbeing thought to be promoted, such as 'genuine self-understanding' and 'autonomy' are the kinds of personal values that we would associate with (a liberal) perfectionism, like that of Joseph Raz.⁶¹ These accounts, especially those that adhere to the positive view that egalitarian social relationships are good *for* us (and not only the negative view that inegalitarian relationships are bad for us) seem to claim superiority for those conceptions of the good that make space for such relationships, or the goods that they are thought to promote. Therefore, we are encouraged to look down on those conceptions of the good in which such relationships are not valued, or in which goods like autonomy and truthful living do not play a central role. According to Scheffler, we are to value these relationships because of their contribution to human flourishing. This limits the extent to which such a view can claim neutrality between conceptions of the good. This seems especially relevant in

⁶⁰ R.H. Tawney, *Equality* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 113.

⁶¹ Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Scheffler's case, since his is a story in which relational egalitarianism is apparently inspired by, and attributable to, Rawls, whom we do not normally associate with perfectionism.⁶² Of course, Scheffler offers the less 'philosophically venutresome' account of the value of egalitarian relationships as well, and perhaps he would want to associate Rawls with that account.⁶³

Let's imagine that it is true that egalitarian social relationships are indeed good for us, and, what is more, good for us in the kind of way that a political community ought to care about. All we have learned from this is that participation in egalitarian social relationships is either a sui generis aspect of human flourishing or wellbeing, or contributes to human flourishing or wellbeing. This doesn't tell us that much about what to do, or which states of affairs are more valuable than others. It tells us that, all else equal, if we want to promote human flourishing or wellbeing, we should promote these relationships. All political philosophers think we must be attentive to what makes human lives to go well along some metric (though that metric may not be or concern wellbeing or flourishing in any thick sense, but rather to some political analogue of that⁶⁴). All else equal (across everything else that matters) if we can make people better off, we ought to. But once we have identified what metric we care about, the other key question is how we ought to distribute (the means to) that metric.

For example, let's imagine that Scheffler is right, that egalitarian social relationships promote 'truthful living'. Let us also imagine (implausibly, and for illustrative purposes) that this is the only reason we should promote egalitarian relationships, and that truthful living is all that matters in making a life go well. The question then is: 'how should we distribute the means to and/or promote truthful living?' We know that it is valuable, and that that explains why we should promote egalitarian social relationships. But if people can be better and worse informed about life, as such a position recognises, there will then be questions about how we should view different distributions of truthful living. Should we maximize it, such that if one person could know everything there is to know, that would be as good as lots of people

⁶² John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁶³ It would be consistent with Rawlsianism for Scheffler to claim that egalitarian relationships are necessary for human flourishing, provided that that fact plays no role in grounding the claim that our political institutions ought to promote or support such relationships, although Scheffler himself does not distance his claims about human flourishing from his political view of equality. It would also be consistent with Rawlsianism to claim, as Anderson does, that such relationships are necessary for liberty, if liberty is then viewed as a primary social good – i.e., an all-purpose good required for most conceptions of the good. This would give egalitarian relationships instrumental value whilst taking no stand on their intrinsic value for human lives.

⁶⁴ For example, Rawls's primary social goods.

knowing a bit? Or should we equalise it – or at least find value in people having equality of access to truth? Or should we prioritise giving access to truth to those who currently have less? All these positions are, at root, distributive. The point is this: if egalitarian social relationships are thought to be valuable or important because of their contribution to human wellbeing, *and* it is then thought that political institutions and distributions ought to be arranged so as to promote or realise these relationships, this shows us that (these) relational egalitarians care about people’s wellbeing (and think our political institutions ought to care about this kind of wellbeing) and that this care extends beyond the money in their pockets – in other words, they are not resourcists.⁶⁵ But lots of distributive egalitarians, including Cohen, are not resource egalitarians, they are welfare egalitarians.⁶⁶ So this doesn’t seem to be a strike against the distributive egalitarian, it is a strike against resource-focussed egalitarianism, which cannot take account of the way that a financially well-off but dominated person is badly off.

Once we have identified the way that egalitarian social relationships contribute to wellbeing, we still then need to ask ‘what principle(s) should guide us in the distribution of wellbeing?’ Here the relational egalitarian must seemingly choose between (or combine) our familiar *distributive* principles: egalitarianism, sufficiency, prioritarianism, maximin, or maximisation.⁶⁷ They might not proceed directly to that question – they may, for example, seek to answer it through some contractual method – but their claim that relational egalitarianism contributes to human wellbeing or flourishing cannot answer that question. Therefore, this kind of relational egalitarianism simply poses the question of how to distribute the means to a good life, it does not answer it, or provide our answers with a rationale. So relational egalitarians who see egalitarian relationships as being important because they have personal value should *not* criticise distributive egalitarians for having *at root* a distributive

⁶⁵ For the classic statement of a resourcist position, see Dworkin, ‘Equality of Resources’.

⁶⁶ More strictly, Cohen offer the hybrid metric of ‘advantage’ as the metric of egalitarian justice. See his ‘On the Currency’. For a more strictly welfarist egalitarian view, see Richard Arneson, ‘Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare’ in *Philosophical Studies* 56 (1989): 77-93.

⁶⁷ Alexander Brown has recently criticized O’Neill in particular of being a closet distributive egalitarian, since O’Neill invokes self-respect in defence of relational egalitarianism, and Brown believes this shows O’Neill to be a distributive egalitarian with a self-respect type metric. This moves too fast for two reasons. First, it ignores O’Neill’s comments on the impersonal value of social relationships. Second, O’Neill is at most committed to the personal good of (and others like) self-respect, and his relational egalitarianism does not commit him to an *egalitarian* distribution of those goods, let alone an *at root* distributive egalitarianism. (For example, O’Neill might think we ought to have an egalitarian social relationships, but only because that will maximize self-respect). See: Alexander Brown, ‘What Should Egalitarians Believe If They Really Are Egalitarians?’, *European Journal of Political Theory* (forthcoming), 4-5.

view. They have not shown that their view is not, at root, distributive: the distributive roots may be obscured by the focus on the contribution that certain kinds of social relationships can make to individual wellbeing, but distributivism may nevertheless lurk underneath. Indeed, some relational egalitarians may, at root, be (welfarist) distributive *egalitarians*. And certainly this type of relational egalitarianism is easily combinable with distributive views.

This puts distributive equality and relational equality in an interesting relationship. On the one hand, they can be articulated as competing interpretations of the same value – namely, equality. On the other hand, they appear to be answering completely different questions, and focusing on different parts of political philosophy. Relational egalitarians are focused on the question of what (for political purposes) is, or contributes to, a good life – what is it that our political institutions should try to provide for us? Distributive egalitarians are focused on the question of how we should distribute the means to what (for political purposes) is, or contributes to, a good life. This makes the two positions potentially complimentary.

The ‘personal value’ relational egalitarian *could* still criticise the distributive egalitarian for believing *equality* to be at root a distributive value, if, for example, they thought that we ought to maximise wellbeing whilst believing that egalitarian social relationships provide a way for us to do this. However, the relational egalitarian would then have to recognise that their position is not, fundamentally, an egalitarian one – their commitment to equality is not their fundamental commitment, their commitment to maximising wellbeing is. And such a view seems, ultimately, as distributive, ‘arithmetic’, and indeed as abstract, as the distributive egalitarian view.

Of course, it would be implausible to think that egalitarian social relationships are all that there is to living a good life. Therefore, what relational egalitarians of this type have identified is *one contributing factor* to human flourishing or wellbeing. We then need to identify the others, and decide how we should regard differing distributions of it, *and* different combinations of different forms of wellbeing. For example, imagine that both happiness and truthful living are *sui generis* aspects of wellbeing. We then not only need to decide how we should view differing distributions of wellbeing *among* different people, but also different combinations of *types* of wellbeing *within* people.

Seeing egalitarian relationships as one contributing factor to wellbeing (and maybe even one contributing factor to one type of wellbeing) does not mean that relational egalitarianism is not an important project or insight. But it does place the personal value version of the view in context. Even if it can be housed within a distributive view, though, it tells us something important about how we ought to proceed. Distributivists tend to operate as if we can identify what wellbeing is, and *then* decide how it (or the means to it) should be distributed. But, just as utilitarians provide arguments for equality based on the diminishing marginal significance of utility, relational egalitarians provide us with an argument for distributive equality (broadly conceived) based on the contribution of such distributions to certain kinds of relationship, and the contribution of those relationships to wellbeing. This view shows that *distributions* (through relationships) can impact on *wellbeing*, and so we should not view the wellbeing-distribution relationship as one-way traffic. However, despite the importance of the relational egalitarian insight, the personal value view makes the relational egalitarian project seem part of a distributive view, or at least a view that could easily be incorporated by a distributive view.

What if egalitarian social relationships are instead, as per O'Neill, viewed as having impersonal value? In this case, I am inclined to agree with Schemmel that such a view seems 'mysterious'. The idea of impersonal value itself is sometimes thought to be mysterious. Can something be valuable even though it is not good *for* anybody, or anything? I think it can be, though this doesn't mean that I find the view non-mysterious or -abstract. The idea of impersonal value seems most clear when the value is completely independent of human lives. Consider, to use a well-known example, the Grand Canyon. Aside from the value that this has for people, it arguably has a value beyond that. Even if everyone in the world would be a tiny bit better off if we built a giant parking lot in the Grand Canyon, that would seem to disrespect the inherent (and impersonal) value that it holds. Another example might be biodiversity. Is the world in which a common big cats dies as bad as the one in which the last tiger dies? I think the second may well be worse, and it is hard to fully spell this out in terms which relay all the value lost back to individual lives – it might just be that a world with no tigers is worse than a world with tigers, even if it isn't worse *for* anybody or anything.

Thinking about impersonal value in terms of human affairs (like distributions or relationships between people) is harder. To accept that such values exist mean recognising that we can and should impact on human lives in ways that are not good for any of those lives. The values to be

promoted are *of* human lives, but not valuable *for* human lives. Despite the apparent strangeness of these ideas, Larry Temkin shows many intuitive cases where we accept that a state of affairs could be in one way better, even though it is worse for someone and better for no one.⁶⁸ However, these are largely cases where the *distribution* has some value (like fairness) which is independently valuable. Thinking about interpersonal relationships, which seem intimately connected with individual lives and identities, in terms of impersonal value is a still further step, and, to me, seems to be just about the most abstract and mysterious claim of impersonal value you could have. Consider your relationships with your nearest and dearest, and then consider why they're valuable. Is it because they make our lives better, because they're the appropriate relationships for us to have, or because they simply make the world better, regardless of what they do for us? The latter seems the most mysterious and abstract of these views. The same seems, to me at least, true of social relationships too. Can the value of these relationships really be found outside our lives?

I do not point any of this out to say that it is impossible that egalitarian social relationships have impersonal value. But it is certainly an abstract and mysterious thought. In addition to these worries, if egalitarian social relationships have impersonal value, perhaps we should not care about their location or distribution. Since they are not good *for* people, perhaps we should not care who they obtain between, or if some people have many and others none at all. Imagine a society where Alice views everyone, and is viewed by everyone, as an equal. But everyone else's relationships are characterised by nasty inegalitarian elements. Holding the number of egalitarian/inegalitarian social relationships fixed, this society is just as good, from the perspective of impersonally valuable relationships, as one in which everyone has some egalitarian social relationships and some inegalitarian ones. That is, unless the impersonal value of such relationships is conditional on their distribution, or there are impersonal values embodied in the distribution of such relationships. But to acknowledge this would be to see distributions of goods (certain kinds of relationships) as holding impersonal value. Aren't we back in mysterious, abstract and arithmetic territory here?⁶⁹

The main point is this: relational egalitarians (and O'Neill in particular) have criticised the distributive egalitarian view for being undermotivated, abstract and mysterious. When asked why distributive equality is valuable, distributive egalitarians say 'it just is'. O'Neill says this isn't good enough. He thinks that egalitarians should be able to offer *reasons* for why

⁶⁸ Temkin, 'Equality, Priority and the Levelling Down Objection'.

⁶⁹ I am grateful to Liam Shields for useful comments here.

distributive inequality is bad: 'the Non-Intrinsic egalitarian will have a more fully elaborated account of why and how inequality is bad, of a kind that is unavailable to the Telic egalitarian. It is to the credit of Non-Intrinsic egalitarianism that this makes the view easier to defend. On a Non-Intrinsic egalitarian view, the skeptic about egalitarianism can be countered by a detailed account of the variety of considerations in which the badness of inequality is grounded.'⁷⁰

Yet, if we push O'Neill-style relational egalitarians on *why* these things are bad, their answer will concern the value of egalitarian social relationships. And if we push them on why *they're* so good, their answer will be (at least in part) 'they just are'. Given this, are they on much, if any, firmer ground than the distributive egalitarian? Perhaps all moral claims must, ultimately, be grounded in abstract and mysterious claims. Certainly those views that include claims about impersonal value seem to be destined to be abstract, mysterious, and metaphysically controversial. So it doesn't seem a consideration in favour of one over another that the other is abstract and mysterious. Certainly it doesn't look like a consideration in favour of impersonal relational egalitarianism over distributive egalitarianism.

In addition to arguing that relational egalitarianism is a superior understanding of equality to distributive egalitarianism, O'Neill argues that, once we accept relational egalitarianism, we see that Parfit's question 'equality or priority?' presents us with a false dichotomy.⁷¹ This is because, alongside our relational egalitarianism, we can endorse the priority distributive view (the view that the worse off someone is, the more important it is to benefit them). In the context of O'Neill's rejection of distributive egalitarianism, I find this claim strange. Firstly because if we can endorse the priority view alongside relational egalitarianism, why can we not endorse distributive egalitarianism alongside her relational sister? O'Neill may reply that we could have this view, as a matter of logical consistency, but that we shouldn't, because of the arithmetic nature and abstractness of the distributive egalitarian view. But prioritarianism seems to bear these features too and, in addition, as Ingmar Persson makes clear⁷², the priority view entails endorsing a kind of impersonal value directly located in distributions, which is, at least partly, what seems to make the telic egalitarian view abstract and mysterious.

⁷⁰ O'Neill, 'What Should Egalitarians Believe?', 133-134.

⁷¹ Ibid., 152-155.

⁷² Ingmar Persson, 'Equality, Priority and Person-Affecting Value' in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 4 (2001): 23-39, at 26-29.

Indeed, as an aside, we needn't necessarily choose between distributive equality and the priority view. Much of the recent literature on distributive ethics has concerned whether we should be egalitarians or prioritarrians. But since distributive egalitarians such as Cohen are pluralists, they don't believe equality to be the only distributive value. Usually, equality is coupled with a concern for something like 'efficiency' or 'total wellbeing' (i.e., some kind of maximizing concern). But there is no reason why a concern for distributive equality shouldn't be coupled with the priority view in the stead of this maximizing concern. Indeed, I am tempted to endorse such a view: the worst off are entitled to support both because they're on the wrong side of inequality, *and* because they're worse off in absolute terms.

Let us turn now to the justice-based understanding promoted most clearly by Christian Schemmel. Schemmel claims that his view is, in its foundations, the same as that of Anderson and Scheffler.⁷³ However, as I have tried to show, when they try to show the importance of egalitarian social relationships, both Anderson and Scheffler at least in part focus on why such relationships are *good for us*, or at least why the absence of domination and oppression is good for us. This suggests a (partly) personal value-based view, rather than a justice-based, or ultimately normative, view.

Again, like the version of relational egalitarianism based on impersonal value, this view is perhaps abstract. Consider justifications to citizens of forms of political arrangement designed to foster egalitarian social relationships that may be detrimental to their wellbeing, but that are justified on the basis that a society has an obligation to foster such relationships. Unlike the previous view, in which the promotion of egalitarian social relationships was justified on the basis that, while things may be worse *for* the citizen, they would be better *all things considered* better, here the claim is that things may be *worse*, but that we have an obligation to make things worse. I don't think that this makes the view implausible – it is a familiar thought to non-consequentialists. But it does perhaps make it abstract and mysterious, which is exactly what some relational egalitarians have suggested is wrong with distributive egalitarianism. After all, what exactly is the basis of the idea that people ought to be treated as equals, given that we've ruled out that it is in their interests, or that the equal distribution of certain things (like self-respect) is valuable in and of itself? If the moral importance of egalitarian social relationships is simply a foundational, unjustified claim, a theoretical starting point, then, like distributive egalitarianism, it *seems* abstract. I have italicized the words *seems* in the foregoing

⁷³ Schemmel, 'Why Relational Egalitarians Should Care About Distributions', 365.

sentence, because I am a little unsure of my ground here. That is because I am a little unsure about what, exactly, the charge of abstraction is, or why abstraction is a bad thing in a political philosophical claim. But since ‘mystery’ and ‘abstraction’ feature so heavily in O’Neill and Scanlon’s attacks on distributive equality, it is worth noting that the relational views appear to carry these features.⁷⁴

Schemmel’s normative view also seems to leave space for distributive egalitarianism. It says that relational concerns create normative prescriptions which bound permissible action. This may (and Schemmel thinks will) include prescriptions about distributions. But we can imagine that relational egalitarianism will create limits to distributions, such that there will be a plurality of distributions which meet the relational criteria (Schemmel believes that this range will be narrower than most relational egalitarians, since he thinks that the distributive prescriptions will be quite precise). However, *within* that permissible range (however wide or narrow), we could still find a place for distributive egalitarianism. For example, many would accept that normative injunctions against killing prevent that being used as a means to realising equality. In the relational egalitarian case, we should not promote distributive equality in ways that would involve disrupting people’s rights to be seen and treated as an equal. In other words, Schemmel’s view doesn’t seem to directly *oppose* distributive egalitarianism, but rather may simply place (egalitarian) limits on it. Indeed, Cohen thinks something like this, as he believes that community considerations veto luck egalitarian-approved inequalities.⁷⁵ This is also one way to read Jonathan Wolff’s relational egalitarianism. Wolff’s ‘Freedom, Respect and the Egalitarian Ethos’⁷⁶ is sometimes placed alongside Anderson and Scheffler’s papers as a group of influential relational egalitarian critiques of luck

⁷⁴ I am grateful to the members of Mancept, and Liam Shields in particular, and Christian Schemmel for pushing me toward greater clarity here, or at least greater acknowledgement of my unclarity and uncertainty.

⁷⁵ This reading is suggested by *Why Not Socialism?*, p. 12: ‘The community principle *constrains* the operation of the egalitarian principle by *forbidding* certain inequalities that the egalitarian principle permits.’ And p. 37: ‘Do the relevant [community-based] *prohibitions* merely *define the terms within which [distributive] justice will operate*, or do they sometimes (*justifiably?*) *contradict justice?*’ My emphases. I would have expected Cohen to see community and justice as in tension and a need to intuitively balance their competing demands, but he seems to see community as placing firm limits on the pursuit of justice (i.e., distributive equality). It is worth noting, to avoid confusion, that Schemmel and Cohen have very different understandings of what kinds of claims claims of *justice* are. So when Schemmel says relational considerations are justice considerations, he means that they have a certain priority or weight – a priority or weight which Cohen does not accord to justice, which is (for example) overridden by community. On this aspect of Cohen’s work, see my ‘Internal Doubts about Cohen’s Rescue of Justice’, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18 (2010): 228-247.

⁷⁶ Jonathan Wolff, ‘Fairness, Respect and the Egalitarian Ethos’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27 (1998): 97-122.

egalitarianism.⁷⁷ However, Wolff's paper is importantly different. It says that there are (egalitarian) limits, based on respect (about the way we see and treat one another), to the *pursuit* of distributive fairness. But that position doesn't deny that distributive fairness or equality is a value.⁷⁸

A distributive egalitarianism may enter Scanlon's contractualist view in a slightly different way. Aaron James has argued that contractualism cannot *support* a distributive theory like luck egalitarianism, since contractualism focuses on the *personal reasons* we can put forward to one another in favour of or against particular principles, principles that define what we owe to each other, whilst 'a distribution *taken as such*, cannot be owed, and so cannot be justice'.⁷⁹ However, leaving aside questions of terminology (i.e., whether or not luck egalitarianism can be a theory of *justice*) it can certainly still get a look in. Scanlon explicitly allows that not all *personal reasons* (the reasons we must traffic in in order to work out what we owe to each other) are reasons grounded in wellbeing. For example, reasons grounded in *fairness* are admissible. Scanlon writes that 'We have reason to object to principles simply because they arbitrarily favor the claims of some over others: that is to say, because they are unfair.'⁸⁰ What is it for a principle to 'arbitrarily favor' some over others? Scanlon doesn't say, but the luck egalitarian focus on those factors over which we have no control or responsibility is a plausible contender here. So luck egalitarianism may qualify as a theory of *fairness*, which can ground a *personal reason* which can be put forward within an *egalitarian justificatory framework* to work out *matters of justice* (what we owe to each other). Of course, we may put forward other personal reasons to be concerned about distributions, for example, whether they lead to objectionable relationships, but reasons of fairness can still play a role in evaluating which principles we can and can't reasonably reject.

To sum up this section, the most tangible, least abstract of the explanations as to why egalitarian social relationships are valuable is to explain the contribution that these relationships (or the absence of their opposites) make to human lives going well. They are the

⁷⁷ Wolff himself notes this in his 'Fairness, Respect and the Egalitarian Ethos Revisited', *Journal of Ethics* 14 (2010): 335-350.

⁷⁸ See *ibid.*

⁷⁹ James, 'The Significance of Distribution', p. 276. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁰ Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, p. 216. See also: James, 'The Significance of Distribution', p. 280 (which notes Scanlon's comments on fairness); and p. 281 (where the method employed by distributive theorists is described as 'at best incomplete', not ruling out a potential role within contractualism). On p. 282 James acknowledges that one will have some personal reason to be compensated for bad luck, but he bases these on personal welfare, rather than fairness.

most immediate and easy to grasp reasons for thinking these relationships important. But these answers may point us (a) toward (a thin) perfectionism; and (b) onwards to distributive theories about how we should view different distributions of wellbeing or the means to it. Certainly these views are not opposed to distributive views, and could easily be housed within them. Claims about the impersonal value of relationships will be abstract, and in O’Neill’s view appear to be coupled with distributive views, that are also abstract (one of which may be distributive egalitarianism). Finally, normative views are potentially abstract, in that they claim that we ought to do something to people, including trying to formulate certain kinds of relationship, but not because this is in those people’s interests. In addition, such a view seems to leave space for distributive egalitarianism, either within the bounds of relational-friendly distributions, or as a personal reason put forward within an egalitarian justificatory relationship.

V Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have sought to contribute to the debate about equality which is often framed as being about distributive *or* relational equality. I have tried to do this by, first, asking ‘what is the point of egalitarian social relationships?’, and showing that relational egalitarians seem to offer a variety of different answers to this question. Second, I have tried to show that some of the worries that some relational egalitarians have with distributive egalitarianism may be found in the relational egalitarianisms as well. Finally, and relatedly, I have tried to show that all relational egalitarian theories are compatible with some role for distributive egalitarianism, and some relational egalitarian theories – those which focus on how egalitarian relationships improve individual lives – may even presuppose the need for (independent) distributive principles. This final conclusion is, I think, in the spirit of G.A. Cohen in two ways. The first is that Cohen, as I pointed out at the start, had various commitments which point toward some combination of distributive and relational egalitarianism. The second is that Cohen was a pluralist, and in articulating his luck egalitarian beliefs he was always keen to emphasize that he was trying to articulate one value among a plurality⁸¹ (or, indeed, one part of one value among a plurality⁸²). So Cohen often emphasized that we are not always forced to choose between seemingly competing conceptions or principles. As I have tried to show, this may be true of relational and distributive versions of egalitarianism.

⁸¹ See his ‘methodological preliminaries’ in ‘On the Currency’, 908-912.

⁸² In *Rescuing* (p. 7) Cohen states that the luck egalitarian principle is a principle of justice, but that unjust inequalities may be permissible because of non-justice considerations and non-distributive justice considerations.