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DOMINATION, SOCIAL STATUS, AND DISTRIBUTIVE  
INEQUALITY

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***Domination, Social Status, and Distributive Inequality***

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## **Abstract**

Is the political value of equality a distributive ideal, governing the allocation of goods, or an ideal demanding egalitarian social and political relationships? Theories of social justice that argue for the latter understanding of equality have gained currency in the last decade or so. Yet their focus on social and political relationships should not be taken to imply that they neglect questions of distributive justice, and settle for a minimalist, sufficiency view regarding the distribution of goods. This paper argues that relational egalitarianism, properly understood, requires a demandingly egalitarian distribution of goods such as income, wealth, and opportunities for desirable social positions, for both intrinsic and instrumental reasons: egalitarian distributions of socially produced goods express people's standing as equals in societal cooperation, and are instrumentally necessary to avoid unjust relationships, such as domination, and the emergence of objectionably inegalitarian status norms.

## **Keywords**

Relational equality, distributive justice, domination, social status.

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## Introduction

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

The paper has five sections. Section 1 introduces the problem. Section 2 argues that, given their commitment to an ideal of society as a cooperative scheme among equals, relational egalitarians ought to hold that there are intrinsic reasons of justice in favour of distributive equality in socially produced goods. Sections 3 and 4 deliver additional instrumental reasons for relational egalitarians to limit inequalities of income and wealth: such inequalities engender risks of domination, predominantly through their impact on the workings of political institutions (section 3), and encourage the formation of unequalitarian social status norms that are damaging to the self-respect of the worse off (section 4). Section 5 concludes by applying the arguments made in Sections 3 and 4 to the case of equality of opportunity to attain desirable social positions, and shows that justice-based relational egalitarianism is committed to a demanding principle of equality of opportunity so understood.

## 1. The Problem

The most important and stringent distributive requirement that follows from the ideal of relational equality is that basic social and political institutions must bring about a distribution of goods that enables individuals equally, and adequately, to avoid unjust relationships such as domination and marginalisation, and discourages the emergence of objectionable status hierarchies. As Anderson argues,

[n]egatively, people are entitled to whatever capabilities are necessary to enable them to avoid or escape entanglement in oppressive relationships. Positively, they are entitled to the capabilities necessary for functioning as an equal citizen in a democratic state.<sup>3</sup>

In short, what relational egalitarians seek to equalise are the *social bases of self-respect* for all members of society: the overall social preconditions necessary to develop and maintain “a sense of

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality?,” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287-337, and “Welfare, Work Requirements, and Dependant-Care”, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 21 (2004): 243-256.

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

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

themselves as free and effective agents”<sup>4</sup> of equal standing to others.<sup>5</sup> If no such commitment was at the basis of such views, but merely concerns about, for example, the consequences of oppression for its victims' opportunity to live a minimally decent life, they would not classify as egalitarian views at all.

Neither Anderson nor Scheffler have so far developed a full-fledged account of the distributive requirements of relational egalitarianism. Anderson's sketch of such an account spells out three dimensions in which individuals have to have adequate means in order to be able to stand in a relationship of equality to each other: a) as human beings – this covers aspects of physical and mental well-being, freedom from (treatable) illness, freedom of movement, etc.; b) as a worker in a system of cooperation – covering, *inter alia*, the education necessary to carry out a function in the division of labour, and freedom of occupational choice; and c) as a participant in democratic politics – covering equal rights to political participation and the means necessary to exercise such rights in a meaningful manner.<sup>6</sup>

The main worry that this account faces in the current debates about the value of equality, and its connection to social justice, is that it displays too little sensitivity to the comparative distribution of material goods in society among its members – that, by seeking to refocus egalitarian theorising on matters of social and political relationships rather than distributions, it makes the concomitant claim that the distributive sphere is of little importance. This is because Anderson's account of distributive justice seems to commit her to two claims. First, as several critics have noted<sup>7</sup>, to a sufficiency conception of distributive justice: such a conception merely demands that individuals be given enough to cross the relevant threshold set by the respective theory of justice – in the case of more orthodox sufficiency views<sup>8</sup>, this is often referred to as “a decent life”; in the case of relational egalitarianism, it is the relationship of standing as an equal to others. Distributive inequalities between individuals who are above the threshold are then of no intrinsic concern to social justice.<sup>9</sup>

Second, Anderson seems to be committed to the claim that the distributive requirements of relational egalitarianism are sufficientarian also in an all-things-considered sense, including possible instrumental rationales for equalising distributions: even if distributive inequality is not by itself regarded as a concern for justice, it could be that people stand to each other in the required egalitarian

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<sup>4</sup> Scheffler, “Choice, Circumstance, and the Value of Equality,” p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term “social bases of self-respect” (John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), p. 54) for the good in question, because relational egalitarian views hold that suffering a lack of self-respect constitutes an injustice only if social mechanisms and institutions can be held responsible for this; cf. also Thomas Scanlon, “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality,” in Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams (eds.), *The Ideal of Equality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2002), pp. 41-59; p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality,” pp. 317f. However, given her focus on social cooperation, Anderson can only be committed to the idea that people are owed equal capabilities to function *as human beings* as a matter of social justice *in virtue of their capacity, and willingness, to participate in a system of cooperative production*, not simply in virtue of their humanity. This does not rule out duties of justice to non-cooperators; it only rules out that these duties are significantly egalitarian. Similarly, it does not rule that there may be other egalitarian duties towards non-cooperators, such as duties of humanity.

<sup>7</sup> Paula Casal, “Why Sufficiency is not Enough”, *Ethics* 117 (2007): 296-326, pp. 297, 322, Richard Arneson, “Distributive Justice and Basic Capability Equality – ‘Good Enough’ is not Good Enough,” in Alexander Kaufman (ed.), *Capabilities Equality – Basic Issues and Problems* (London: Routledge 2006), pp. 17-43, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1986) ch. 9, Harry Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” *Ethics* 98 (1987): 21-43, “Equality and Respect,” *Social Research* 64 (1997): 3-15, and “The Moral Irrelevance of Equality,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 14 (2000): 87-103, and Roger Crisp, “Equality, Priority, and Compassion,” *Ethics* 113 (2003): 745-63, and “Egalitarianism and Compassion,” *Ethics* 114 (2004): 119-26. The argument of this paper does not apply directly to these views, which are sufficientarian “all the way down”; it argues that relational egalitarians cannot be distributive sufficientarians.

<sup>9</sup> Sufficiency would not necessarily be an independent rival position to egalitarianism if it merely claimed that the requirement to raise everybody over the sufficiency threshold enjoyed priority over other justice concerns. The additional claim that inequalities above that threshold are of *no* relevance to justice is needed to turn it into such a distinct position; cf. Casal, “Why Sufficiency is not Enough,” pp. 299f.



social relationships only under conditions of strict distributive equality; or that this can only be achieved if stringent limits are set to material inequality (as will indeed be argued below in sections 3-5). But Anderson seems to hold – in places, at least – that a reasonably low cut-off point can be found for distributive concerns instrumental to achieving such relationships. For example, she argues that “[m]ost able-bodied citizens [...] will get access to the divisible resources they need to function [as an equal in the three dimensions mentioned above] by earning a wage or some equivalent compensation due to them on account of their filling some role in the division of labor”,<sup>10</sup> and that “one mechanism for achieving a *decent minimum* would be a minimum wage”.<sup>11</sup> Such claims are decidedly unambitious – the possibly vast disparities between different wages and remunerations for different positions within the societal division of labour are not even mentioned. This seems to vindicate the suspicion of distributive egalitarians that relational egalitarianism vacates large part of the terrain of distributive justice. Among contemporary political theorists, only hard-nosed right-libertarians deny that members of society are owed at least a “decent minimum”.

Scheffler, on the other hand, suggests that a relational understanding of equality can plausibly underpin egalitarian conceptions of distributive justice such as Rawls's “justice as fairness”.<sup>12</sup> The task of this paper is to spell out the arguments for such a view, and to show that relational egalitarianism, properly understood, does not have the distributive implications that Anderson thinks it has. Such a position does indeed claim that a plausible conception of social justice should regard the avoidance of unjust social relationships as the dominant egalitarian aim of basic social and political institutions, and should not regard distributive equality *per se* as a value of similar stringency. But, as this paper will go on to show, a sufficiency distribution cannot satisfy the requirements of relational equality; on a plausible understanding of such a view, distributive inequality raises concerns of justice for both intrinsic and instrumental reasons. As to the former, relational egalitarians regard society as a cooperative enterprise among persons of equal moral status. From this it follows that they have to hold that there are intrinsic reasons of justice in favour of distributive equality in socially produced goods among these persons. According to such a *presumption of equality*, all inequalities brought about by social factors have to be justified by justice-relevant reasons (section 2).

As to the latter, a commitment to the ideal of society as a cooperative enterprise among equals also requires paying particular attention to two areas of concern: first, what distributive inequality enables members of society to do to each other. Distributive inequality might, in instances, be judged unobjectionable, when taken in isolation, but might end up being judged impermissible because of the risk of unjust social relationships it gives rise to (section 3). Second, distributive inequality might pose a threat to individuals' social status in society, according to prevailing norms, which is internalised in terms of self-respect (section 4).

## **2. Justifying Inequality**

To the first point then, the presumption of distributive equality in social goods based on the ideal of society as a cooperative enterprise whose participants enjoy equal moral status. The argument of this section is straightforward: given that relational egalitarians such as Anderson and Scheffler follow Rawls in specifying participation as equals in reciprocal cooperation as the foundational relationship of egalitarian social justice,<sup>13</sup> they have to, like Rawls, accept a presumption of distributive equality in the goods produced by such cooperation. Such a position differs from distributive views such as luck egalitarianism, which regards distributive inequalities for which individuals are not responsible

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<sup>10</sup> Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality,” p. 321; *cf.* also Anderson, “Welfare, Work Requirements, and Dependant-Care,” p. 251.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality,” p. 328 (emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> Scheffler, “What is Egalitarianism,” pp. 22f., 31.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality,” Scheffler, “What is Egalitarianism,” and “Choice, Circumstance, and the Value of Equality,” *passim*.

through their own choices as unfair, and hence *pro tanto* unjust,<sup>14</sup> because what it judges to be just or unjust, in the first instance, are not distributions of goods among individuals, but the social relationships that govern the production and distribution of such goods: these relationships are regulated by, in Rawls's terms, the "basic structure of society", that is, a society's main social, political and economic institutions.<sup>15</sup> If the basic structure has to display egalitarian concern for participants in the enterprise of cooperative production that it regulates, then this generates a *pro tanto* claim on the part of its participants to an equal share of the goods produced. Advantages and disadvantages that are socially produced are to be distributed equally, unless there are sufficient reasons for an unequal distribution: unequal distributions of such goods (and bads) constitute unequal treatment on the part of the basic structure, and have to be justified by justice-relevant reasons.<sup>16</sup> A relational egalitarian position that sought to exclude distributive inequality in social goods from the scope of social justice, and to restrict itself to demanding that participants in cooperation do not encounter each other in particular unjust inequalitarian relationships, such as domination, would be a non-starter: such an exclusion would simply be arbitrary. On such a view, avoidance of relationships such as domination is indeed the most stringent demand of social justice; but this does mean that distributive inequalities in social goods having no such relational consequences do not need to be justified.

The Rawlsian view that equal treatment by the basic structure demands a *pro tanto* equal distribution of social goods (and bads) is, of course, controversial, and has been subject to intensive debate over the last four decades. This section does not seek to defend it against rival views; possibly the most notable of these is the view that equal treatment demands rewarding people according to their individual contribution to cooperation, that is, according to their distributive desert. It only argues that relational egalitarians such as Anderson and Scheffler have to be committed to a Rawlsian position on distributive inequality. Regarding desert, both are indeed skeptical regarding the existence of independent, pre-institutional criteria that could determine what people individually deserve in distributive terms: they argue that the highly complex division of labour that characterises advanced economies makes it impossible to determine the value of individual contributions to cooperative production at a fundamental level. Social goods hence have to be regarded as jointly produced.<sup>17</sup> And they could not easily give up this skepticism: if distribution could and should be undertaken according

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<sup>14</sup> Radical luck egalitarians do not ascribe any foundational importance to participation in cooperation, but regard their conception of distributive equality as a direct implication of the abstract moral equality of humans, according to which all humans, *qua* humans, enjoy a basic equality of moral standing. Arguably, Gerald A. Cohen, "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," *Ethics* 99 (1989): 906-944, and Richard Arneson, "Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," *Philosophical Studies* 56 (1989): 77-93, are examples of such a view. Other egalitarians, such as Dworkin, single out a different foundational relationship, that of being subject to the coercive laws of the state, Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2000), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 6, and Anderson, "What's the Point of Equality," p. 309: "[T]he primary subject of justice is the institutional arrangements that generate people's opportunities over time." For a similar position on socially produced goods, but in the context of an argument focusing not on relational egalitarianism as understood here but on a conception of equality that can serve as the basis of an "overlapping consensus" along the lines laid out by Rawls in his later work, cf. Heath, Joseph: "Political Egalitarianism", *Social Theory and Practice* 34 (2008): 486-516.

<sup>16</sup> Restricting requirements of distributive equality to social goods does not imply that justice does not require any assistance to those who are naturally disadvantaged – especially those who are permanently excluded from cooperation due to, e.g., severe mental handicaps, cf. above fn. 6. For an argument that an entitlement to a social minimum for non-cooperators fits within a Rawlsian framework, cf. Cynthia A. Stark, "How to Include the Severely Disabled in a Contractarian Theory of Justice", *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15 (2007): 127-145.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, "What's the Point of Equality," pp. 321f., Samuel Scheffler, "Justice and Desert in Liberal Theory," in *Boundaries and Allegiances – Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), pp. 173-196, pp. 190f. As should be clear, this does not rule out that differential *willingness* to cooperate could, in principle, make a difference to distributive entitlements.

to desert, it seems that one needs a reason why peoples' self-respect, or at least some components thereof, should not also vary according to such desert.<sup>18,19</sup>

The next step of the Rawlsian account is to determine what should count as justice-relevant reasons mandating a departure from distributive equality. Rawls's "general conception of justice" offers a convincing interpretation of the presumption:

All social values [...] are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone's advantage.<sup>20</sup>

If relational egalitarians accept the Rawlsian idea of society as a cooperative enterprise, they also have reason to follow him on the general conception of justice. This conception is stringent, since, on a close reading of its wording, it demands that all inequalities be to everybody's *substantive advantage*. But this stringency is indeed required, because it follows directly from the intrinsic importance for justice of distributive equality in social goods: All members of society have a claim to such equality, since this is what their equality of standing as equal participants in cooperation demands. This claim can hence only be defeated by reasons that are strong enough from *each participant's point of view*.

As is well-known, inequality-justifying reasons according to Rawls's conception of justice fall into two large categories: first, rights to basic liberties constraining the maintenance of strict equality (the rationale of Rawls's first principle of justice); and second, reasons of efficiency, demanding a regime of distributive inequality if it leaves the worse off better off than under equality (the rationale of the difference principle). Salient examples of the first class of reasons are the rights to privacy and to a meaningful family life: an institutional regime committed to the maintenance of strict distributive equality will be intolerably intrusive on people's privacy, requiring strictest surveillance and correction of all advantage flows between individuals. Examples of the second class of reasons are the excessive distributive costs that a regime of strictest possible surveillance would entail; some inequalities have to be permitted simply because it would be too costly for everyone to correct them. And, second, the gains that can be achieved for the worse off through materially incentivising productive behaviour.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, relational egalitarians, insofar as they share Rawls's ideal of society as a collective enterprise among equals, ought to be committed to a presumption of equality in social goods, and this presumption introduces stringent criteria for the justification of inequality. As mentioned before,

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<sup>18</sup> Retributive justice is a different issue; cf. Scheffler, *ibid.*, pp. 192ff, for an argument that skepticism regarding distributive desert need not carry over to retributive desert. Relational egalitarians ought to hold that a loss of self-respect due to having committed a crime is, other things being equal, deserved (but they have to hold that punishment may never amount to domination, and that it has, among other things, to guarantee opportunities to regain lost self-respect).

<sup>19</sup> David Miller puts forward a position that seeks to combine the values of distributive desert and social equality. He recommends mixed criteria of distributive justice – equality, desert, and need – cf. David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), ch. 2, and argues that the value of social equality should also influence a society's distributive practices, even though it does not itself constitute a consideration of justice, but a value apart from it, David Miller, "Equality and Justice", in Andrew Mason (ed.), *Ideals of Equality* (Blackwell: Oxford 1998), pp. 21-36. Elsewhere, I argue that Miller's account of the relationship between justice and social equality is vulnerable to inconsistencies (Christian Schemmel, *Social Justice as Relational Equality*, unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford 2009, ch. 3). Anderson's and Scheffler's views of relational equality are, *contra* Miller, justice-based.

<sup>20</sup> A *Theory of Justice*, p. 54. The full quotation includes Rawls's list of primary goods as the "social values" in question. I leave out this list because relational egalitarians need not accept it, cf. Fn. 3 above, and because they insist on *equal* social bases of self-respect. Rawls, in places, also seems to be committed to this, cf. *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 474ff., but his overall position is unclear in this regard: for contrary textual evidence, cf. "Social Unity and Primary Goods", in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 1999), pp. 359-387, p. 363. Cf. Joshua Cohen, "Democratic Equality," *Ethics* 99 (1989): 727-751, pp. 736-743 for a sustained discussion of how "justice as fairness" does better for the social bases of self-respect than a list of "mixed" conceptions that guarantee equal basic liberties and fair equality of opportunity, but endorse a less demandingly egalitarian distribution than the difference principle requires.

<sup>21</sup> As said, it is not the aim of this section to defend Rawls's view against objections. For criticism of Rawls's incentive argument, cf. Gerald A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2008), ch. 1.

Scheffler's approach is congenial to the one taken here. But Anderson also stresses the ideal of society as a cooperative enterprise among equals throughout, and endorses a

principle of interpersonal justification: any consideration offered as a reason for a policy must serve to justify that policy when uttered by anyone to anyone else who participates in the economy as a worker or a consumer.<sup>22</sup>

She also argues for “a conception of reciprocity that would squeeze the gap between the highest- and lowest-paid workers”<sup>23</sup> Putting these considerations together, it would seem natural to interpret her position so as to demand a justification of inequality along the lines just sketched. So she is in need of an argument as to why Rawlsian reasoning about the necessity to justify inequalities in social goods is misguided; as they stand, her distributive recommendations mentioned in the previous section seem inconsistent with the ideal of society as a cooperative enterprise among equals that she endorses. The only explicit objection that she raises against Rawls's difference principle – and against the general conception of justice, since it relies on the same reasoning<sup>24</sup> – is the well-known worry that “[i]n giving absolute priority to the worst off, the difference principle might require considerable sacrifices in the lower middle ranks for trifling gains at the lowest level”.<sup>25</sup> But this is a weak argument, for her purposes. First, one might want to deny that such cases are indeed practically possible, and ask why, in any given case, better placed groups could not in turn compensate the second worse off; the general conception of justice rules out unjustified inequality between all groups, not just between the worse off and the second worse off.<sup>26</sup> Second, even if such cases can indeed occur, the natural response is not to jump to a sufficiency conception of distributive justice, but rather to drop the absolute priority of the worst off in favour of only relative priority, and hence to endorse a prioritarian position.<sup>27</sup>

As a last-ditch effort, one might seek to argue that a suitably specified sufficiency distribution of goods actually fulfils the presumption of equality, along the following lines: “letting surplus benefits go where they fall, according to some suitable, non-arbitrary distributive mechanism, such as a free market, will do best for all”. This would be an empirical argument resembling familiar claims about the “trickling down” of benefits from the better off to the worse off. But it seems unlikely that one could come up with defensible claims of this sort, since the general conception of justice mandates that the economic policy in question produces *the best deal that the worst off could possibly get*: it would have to produce better results for them than all intermediate regimes aiming at limiting inequalities. The presumption of equality cannot be overridden in favour of an economic regime to which better feasible alternatives exist, from the point of view of those whose equality is sacrificed.<sup>28</sup>

How much inequality exactly such a view permits is, however, an open question. The question when inequality in income and wealth benefit the worst off maximally is largely empirical, and, to that extent, has to be answered by economics. Such inequalities may be small, or they may be large – or they may remain unknown. Furthermore, it is not clear to what extent inequalities in income and

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<sup>22</sup> Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality,” p. 322. The principle goes back to Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, pp. 41-46.

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality,” p. 326.

<sup>24</sup> Relational egalitarians need not endorse the difference principle as applying to income and wealth, but only the general conception of justice, cf. fn. 20 above.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 71f.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Derek Parfit, “Equality or Priority”, *The Lindley Lecture at the University of Kansas* (1991), reprinted in Clayton and Williams (eds.), *The Ideal of Equality*, pp. 81-125, p. 101. *A fortiori*, such a position would also rule out social levelling down, which forbids policies that do not benefit the worse off, no matter how much they benefit others, even if no alternative is available that also benefits the worse off. As an alternative, one might explore the possibility of a societal set-up that incorporates some way of asking the worse off whether they choose to exercise a veto, thus respecting the right that expresses their basic standing as equals in cooperation.

<sup>28</sup> Alternatively, it would have to produce the distribution that best reflects the relative priority of the worst off, see above. This is similarly implausible.

wealth may be offset by advantages in terms of other relevant goods, such as leisure, or a healthy environment. The next three sections argue that justice-based relational equality delivers additional criteria for the permissibility of distributive inequality: on such a view, there are also strong instrumental reasons for limiting inequality of income, wealth, and opportunity, in order to avoid risks of relational injustice and to safeguard equal social bases of self-respect.<sup>29</sup>

### **3. Domination and Distributive Inequality**

This section deals with the first instrumental rationale for limiting permissible distributive inequality: distributive inequalities can lead to unjust social relationships, such as domination. Social justice as relational equality demands that no individuals and groups within society may be subject to an unequal risk of falling victim to such relationships. This principle bases itself on concern about what such unequal relationships do to people's self-respect, understood as a sense of themselves as free and effective agents, and participants of equal moral standing in societal cooperation: if the dominated understand that they are dominated, that someone can influence their fate simply according to her whims, it is hard to see how this could not diminish their self-respect so understood.<sup>30</sup> There might be freak cases in which an individual gains self-respect through facing adversities such as being dominated, e.g., by convincing herself that they are challenges that, in some way, only demonstrate her worth ("God tests those She loves"). But, in most cases, the relationship between domination, awareness of being dominated, and a lowering of self-respect is so straightforward that domination must be regarded, from the point of view of devising principles of social justice regulating basic social and political institutions, as depriving individuals of the social bases of self-respect.

As said above, relational egalitarianism demands equality of such social bases of self-respect; concern about other social values cannot override this requirement. It hence delivers a yardstick with which the presumption of equality discussed above can be filled out with more definite content, and the remainder of the section delivers a first set of reasons why this content will likely be demandingly egalitarian, in material terms.

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

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<sup>29</sup> Martin O'Neill's approach to the relationship between distributive equality and self-respect has some similarities to the one put forward here, cf. "What Should Egalitarians Believe?," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 36 (2008): 119-156, pp. 126-131, but differs significantly in other respects: O'Neill develops a pluralist egalitarian position – which he calls "non-intrinsic egalitarianism", *ibid.*, p. 121 – that draws on a variety of reasons why inequality may not only be unjust, but also bad in other ways, *ibid.*, p. 132; the view put forward here focuses exclusively on a requirement of justice on social and political institutions to safeguard equal social bases of self-respect for those subject to their power.

<sup>30</sup> Scanlon agrees that caring about equal social bases of self-respect constitutes a properly egalitarian goal, "The Diversity of Objections to Inequality," pp. 43, 50, but overlooks the close connection between domination and unequal self-respect when he classifies concern about excessive power differentials between individuals as "non-fundamentally egalitarian", *ibid.*, p. 46.

the degree of acceptable income inequality would depend in part on how easy it was to convert income into status inequality – differences in the social bases of self-respect, influence over elections, and the like. The stronger the barriers against commodifying social status, political influence, and the like, the more acceptable are significant income inequalities. The moral status of free market allocations is strengthened the more carefully defined is the domain in which these allocations have free rein.<sup>31</sup>

This quotation can be read as not only pointing out that distributive inequality is especially troubling if and when it endangers relational equality, but also as making an additional, stronger claim: that relational egalitarians should assign *priority* to strategies and policies that erect barriers against the conversion of wealth and income into status and power; that is, that they should assign priority to sociopsychological and procedural strategies over distributive ones.

Now, sociopsychological and procedural strategies indeed have one crucial advantage over distributive ones: if they are in place and function well, then they implement relational equality *directly*. Strategies of more distributive equality, on the other hand, implement relational equality *indirectly*, that is, only if additional empirical assumptions about how people will use their distributive shares are true. Take access to the media for political purposes as an example: strategies that bar the rich from using their wealth to buy media time implement, if successful, relational equality directly. Against that, a strategy of distributive equality is based on the assumption that people will at least also use their more equal shares to gain access to the media, rather than to merely buy additional consumer goods for themselves.

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

This can be shown by focusing on Anderson’s claim about the necessity of erecting conversion barriers between wealth and other goods, such as status and power. Clearly, some such barriers need to exist.<sup>32</sup> To some extent, different goods pose different conditions on the adequacy of their distribution and transfer. We want people of superior capacities of political reasoning and rhetoric to be able to enjoy better access to such positions than others, because we think that, other things being equal, the political system works better if it is directed by such people, rather than by people who have simply bought their positions of influence. Complete convertibility of wealth into political influence would not be acceptable even if all had equal substantive opportunity to buy such influence. But the relevant question for this section is to what extent convertibility must be blocked in order to make sure *that those with greater distributive means do not obtain opportunities to dominate others* – and to which extent this aim can and should be achieved through other strategies, such as that of equalising distributions. As far as I can see, two arguments speak in favour of a policy of more distributive equality for relational reasons, and against the general preferability of a policy of blocked exchanges.

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<sup>31</sup> Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality,” p. 326.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson’s claim is reminiscent of Walzer’s theory of “complex equality”, according to which the distribution of social goods ought to track the social meaning of these goods in the society in question, Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books 1983).

First, distributive policies might be less *intrusive*. Strategies of limiting permissible distributive inequality can be preferable to procedural and sociopsychological strategies, where the latter involve heavy interference with liberty. Not only might the enforcement of procedural protection involve potentially problematic invasions of privacy, insofar as it might require close monitoring of the spending patterns of the advantaged in politically sensitive matters – whether that is especially troubling seems to depend largely on the individual case. The problem cuts deeper than that: blocking exchanges between different goods cannot be wholly achieved by procedural protection and law enforcement. These strategies require expansive control of individuals and groups by state agents; control that, for a large part, will have to come after the fact occurred, in the form of sanctions. Other things being equal, a better way to erect conversion barriers is sociopsychological, via self- and peer-control, via the entrenchment of social norms regarding the unacceptability of exchange between different goods. But this constitutes a problem of potential illiberality: relational egalitarians such as Anderson and Scheffler are committed to a Rawlsian principle of liberal neutrality<sup>33</sup>, according to which justice merely sets constraints to the pursuit of individual and collective conceptions of the good; avoidance of domination is one of these constraints. An attempt to fix the social meaning of goods so as to block exchanges restricts the capacity of individuals and groups to figure out for themselves what different goods mean to them. From a liberal point of view, it should be up to people, to the greatest extent possible, to decide what money can and cannot buy.<sup>34</sup> Of course, it should not directly buy political office, due to the considerations of functionality and competence mentioned above; but, if somebody whose conception of the good ascribes paramount importance to engagement in politics consequently decides to spend more money on campaigning than others do, is it unjust if, other things being equal, she also gains more influence?<sup>35</sup> It seems that this is not the case, as long as plutocracy is avoided, and the rich are not also the powerful, across the board, who use the political system merely to pursue their own interests. As far as the danger of domination is concerned, the problem here really seems to be constituted by possibly too large distributive inequality and its political consequences, not by the possibility of conversion itself.

Second, limiting distributive inequality might be a *more effective* way to implement relational equality than procedural and sociopsychological strategies: if procedural and socio-psychological strategies work, distributive inequality will be relationally harmless. But the effectiveness of these two strategies will always be, to some extent, precarious, since superior distributive means can and will be used to influence the political process itself, in open attempts to change procedural and sociopsychological norms, or prevent them from being enacted, e.g., through media pressure, or covert attempts to make their subversion easier, by lobbying for loopholes and deliberately vague legislation. Keeping distributive inequality in place hence means leaving the weapons in the possession of the advantaged, and merely prohibiting their use – as opposed to real disarmament. Furthermore, unequal distributive scenarios, such as concentration of the ownership of the means of production, introduce dangers of misrepresentation into the political system. If the means of production are concentrated among a section of the population, and this section manages to act as a political unit, this makes it easier for its members to present their sectarian interests as the interests of “the economy” in general, and thus press for legislation that introduces opportunities for them to dominate others. Superior distributive means hence give the advantaged the instruments to hollow out the system of relational protection in various ways. More distributive equality, if coupled with enough political alertness of citizens in general, can help prevent such scenarios from arising in the first place.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality,” p. 330. For Scheffler, this is implied by the closeness with which his account tracks Rawls’s, cf. “What is Egalitarianism,” p. 25, and “Choice, Circumstance, and the Value of Equality,” pp. 18f. However, he also briefly mentions the possibility of a relational egalitarian ideal that draws on a more comprehensive account of what is good for people, *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Jeremy Waldron, “Money and Complex Equality,” in David Miller and Michael Walzer (eds.), *Pluralism, Justice, and Equality* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1995), pp. 144-170, pp. 167ff.

<sup>35</sup> Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, p. 195.

<sup>36</sup> For reasons such as these (and others), the later Rawls regards redistributive welfare capitalism, which leaves the ownership of the means of production in the hands of relatively few, as an insufficient implementation of “justice as

Neither of these two considerations suffices to fully determine policy. They need to be validated and supplemented by detailed empirical research. However, they do make clear that relational egalitarianism might have much more demandingly egalitarian consequences in terms of distributions than is presently thought in the literature, both by relational egalitarians, such as Anderson, and their adversaries.<sup>37</sup> At the very least, the ideal of relational equality delivers a set of interesting questions to ask, for empirical researchers as well as for decision-makers concerned about distributive policies. In cases where unacceptable power differentials can best be tackled by reducing distributive inequality, social justice as relational equality mandates this reduction.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4. Social Status Norms and Distributive Inequality

The second group of instrumental arguments against inequality of income and wealth centres on cases where the worse off are deprived of the social bases of self-respect because, due to their distributive disadvantage, they are assigned inferior social status, according to prevailing social norms. It is possible to regard such cases as themselves instances of unjust social relationships: if, e.g., poverty leads to shame, through an internalised social norm mandating what counts as an acceptable standard of living, and shame leads to a withdrawal from public life, the poor will be marginalised, on top of the other evils associated with poverty – and marginalisation is, other things being equal, an unjust social relationship.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, one might argue, somewhat more remotely, that such cases constitute domination by the basic structure of society, since the basic structure influences one's life without a proper regard for one's interests, namely, not to be made to feel shame because one has so little. Nevertheless, status inequality cases merit separate treatment, since this clarifies the range and diversity of implications of relational egalitarianism. This section focuses hence on the general norms of social acceptability that determine status, whether or not any particular group in society can be held especially responsible for the existence of these norms. In short, it is more about unequal status in a pure sense than about unequal power, and asks whether and how limiting distributive inequality can address the problem.

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

[s]ociety may permit such large disparities in [...] goods that under existing social conditions these differences cannot help but cause a loss of self-esteem. For those suffering this hurt, envious feelings are not irrational; the satisfaction of their rancor would make them better off. When envy is a reaction to the loss of self-respect in circumstances where it would be unreasonable to expect someone to feel differently, [...] it is excusable.<sup>40</sup>

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fairness", and endorses "property-owning democracy", characterised by widely spread ownership of such means, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2001), pp. 131, 139f.

<sup>37</sup> In Anderson's defence, it needs to be pointed out that part of the ambition of her writings on relational equality is to make policy proposals for real-world scenarios, particularly for the United States. Some of her claims hence incorporate judgment about which more modest reforms seem currently feasible in the US, given rooted ideological traditions and potential unwillingness of sections of the population to go along with more demanding reforms, cf. Anderson, "Welfare, Work Requirements, and Dependant-Care," pp. 252, 255. It is hard to disagree that large-scale redistribution of the means of production is not possible in the US at the moment. But then, whether the successful blocking of conversion of wealth into power is currently any more feasible also seems an open question.

<sup>38</sup> Among sufficientarians, Frankfurt seems to harbour most sympathy for relational egalitarian considerations: "[I]t may be maintained that inequalities in the distribution of economic benefits are to be avoided because they lead invariably to undesirable discrepancies of other kinds – for example, in social status, in political influence, or in the abilities of people to make effective use of their various opportunities and entitlements", "Equality as a Moral Ideal," p. 24.

<sup>39</sup> Unless overriding reasons of justice can be given in favour of some form of marginalisation, such as just punishment; cf. above Fn. 18.

<sup>40</sup> *A Theory of Justice*, p. 468.



But there is something plausible in the conviction that it can never be justified to experience a loss of self-respect, and a consequential feeling of envy, merely because of the fact that others have more than oneself.<sup>41</sup> This conviction is, among others, what drives the view that, if, in material terms, all have enough to satisfy their personal needs and individual interests, the appropriate reaction to material inequality is indifference.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Anderson is rightly hostile to conceding envy as such a role in the justification of principles of social justice: “To even offer one’s envy as a reason to the envied to satisfy one’s desire is profoundly disrespectful.”<sup>43</sup> What is largely missing in Rawls’s account is an explanation of how exactly “existing social conditions” can make it reasonable and justified to feel envy as a reaction to “large disparities in goods”.<sup>44</sup> Under which conditions should one regard such disparities as endangering the equal social bases of self-respect for the worse off? That is a normative question about the justice of the social conditions in question, not a psychological question about people’s tendencies to be envious. In particular, the question is how such conditions may endanger the social bases of self-respect of the worse off even if the overall distribution of goods fulfils the criteria set out in the preceding sections.

The answer to this is that even inequalities that would otherwise be acceptable may give rise to the formation and maintenance of inegalitarian status norms. Distributions influence norms of social acceptability, which in turn govern the appropriateness of emotions like shame that accompany such norm-based judgments of acceptability.<sup>45</sup> Such norms may influence behaviour in such a way that those who fail to meet the standard are treated by others in ways that make their inferiority clear to them – even if, as Scanlon rightly notes,<sup>46</sup> it need not be the point of that treatment to express their inferiority. Such standards can be merely an expression of what most people regard as desirable achievements in life, and to which they hence orient their behaviour, thereby giving others incentives to do likewise, and (inadvertently) penalizing those who do not want to, or cannot, live up to them.

This can happen in myriad ways. Here is just one example: middle-class parents often take great care to select the playmates of their children, and discourage them from playing with children from poorer, or less educated, backgrounds. It is hard to deny that children from poorer backgrounds (and their parents) are, in such cases, treated in ways that make clear to them that they are socially inferior. But it need not be the point of this treatment to express their inferiority. Parents may simply think that playing with children from more well-placed backgrounds will better enable their children to develop skills that they will need in later life in order to succeed according to prevailing social standards. They could, to an extent, even be right about this. And they could act in this way while happily paying all the taxes that the general conception of justice requires them to pay in order to make the worse off as well off as possible.

Hence, a loss of self-respect and feelings of envy as the result of an interpersonal comparison between the holdings of different individuals, carried out by them in private, is not the relevant case for relational egalitarians. Status norms are publicly known and have pervasive influence on the

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<sup>41</sup> A note of clarification regarding the relationship between self-respect and the feeling of envy: I take a disposition to feel envy at other’s holdings, fortune, or talents, as (partly) constitutive of low self-respect, not as causally distinct from it.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal”, pp. 22-23.

<sup>43</sup> Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality,” p. 307. She argues this against Dworkin’s proposal to determine just individual holdings by recourse to an envy-test; but Dworkin actually relies on a different, more technical notion of envy. Her point applies better to a more everyday notion of envy like the one preoccupying Rawls.

<sup>44</sup> Rawls’s treatment of the relationship between material inequality, status, and self-respect is ambiguous: as seen, he is sensitive to the problem, but in places also claims that, ideally, equality of basic liberties as demanded by his first principle of justice should suffice to take care of the status problem; cf. *A Theory of Justice*, p. 478.

<sup>45</sup> For example, Adam Smith defines “necessaries” as “not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without”. He regarded a linen shirt and leather shoes as such necessities in his days, since “[t]he poorest creditable person, of either sex, would be ashamed to appear in public without them”, *An Inquiry into Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, eds. Roy Campbell, Andrew Skinner (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1976 [1776]); cf. Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality,” p. 320.

<sup>46</sup> “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality,” pp. 52f.

behaviour of members of a society towards each other. Feelings such as envy and shame (or apathy and resignation) among the worse off are reasonable and justified if they can be traced to such norms. But such norms are a problem of justice even where they happen to fail to produce such feelings – e.g., among those of the worse off that have a particularly robust, or impervious, psychological constitution. And conversely, such feelings are not a problem of justice where they cannot be traced to such norms. Focusing on envy instead of on social status norms gets the problem back to front.

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

Take an example involving inequalities in income and wealth: if income and wealth are sufficiently reined in through a strategy of “blocked exchanges”, and more money can serve predominantly only as a means for the acquisition of more consumer goods, and – as must always be the case (*cf.* section 2) – other justice-relevant reasons for permitting distributive inequalities exist, then a sociopsychological strategy can be appropriate, challenging such norms; e.g. by pointing out in school that there is no good reason to link social acceptability to the wearing of brand name clothes. We might hold that the fundamental problem here is not inequality in income and wealth, but a – historically and socially contingent – spirit of “possessive individualism”<sup>47</sup>, which connects status too closely to possession of material goods. Parallel to challenging such norms, attempts could be made to encourage the formation of a plurality of different social groups with divergent standards for assigning status, thus discouraging the formation of society-wide and uniform status norms that facilitate the emergence of objectionable status inequalities.<sup>48</sup>

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

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<sup>47</sup> This label is borrowed from Crawford Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: From Hobbes to Locke* (New York, Oxford University Press 1962).

<sup>48</sup> *Cf.* Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 470 on “non-comparing groups”, and Scanlon, “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality,” pp. 55-56. As noted above, Fn. 20 and 44, Rawls’s treatment of the relationship between material inequality, status, and self-respect is ambiguous.

wide standards of social acceptability as equals.<sup>49</sup> It seems absurd to think that the right basic structural response here is to seek to get the majority not to create such status norms, rather than to lift the wealth level of the disadvantaged group, even if the consequence is not that the norm vanishes, but only that all satisfy it.

Relational egalitarians hence have to be sensitive to the threats to self-respect posed by the effect of distributive inequality on norms governing social status. Relational egalitarian distributions will have to vary with the impact of the overall level of income and wealth of a given society, and their distribution, on such norms.<sup>50</sup> It might be true that a society of individualists without any tendency to form status norms would be better, from many points of view. But as said, achieving such a society has to fall within the limits of what a liberal basic structure may do to those that are subject to its power; and, crucially, this is not merely a problem of “non-ideal theory”. The fundamental problem is not that people act unjustly by discriminating against each other, and that this cannot be prevented without too much repression, so that other remedies need to be found. As seen, the status norms in question do not have to have discrimination as their purpose. They may simply express what people in the society in question regard as desirable aims for their lives. The alternative to the pluralistic strategy argued for in this section – encouraging a pluralism of aims and limiting distributive inequality – hence would seem to have to be to rule out as altogether unjust all those aims whose widespread adoption might lead to the formation of inequalitarian status norms. This would no longer be a liberal view of social equality.

## **5. Relational Equality and Equality of Opportunity**

How does the instrumental framework laid out in the preceding two sections for the case of income and wealth apply to the good of opportunity? First, there is a strong link between inequality of opportunity and scenarios of domination, and second, there is good reason to regard the connection between opportunities and social status as less contingent than the one between status and income and wealth. Opportunity hence turns out to be the easier case for relational egalitarianism. Accordingly, social justice as relational equality does not require a demanding conception of equality of opportunity for desirable goods overall; but it does require a demanding conception of *equality of opportunity to attain desirable social positions*.

Most of the recent debate on equality of opportunity has focused on equality of opportunity in education.<sup>51</sup> This section has a more limited focus: it focuses on equality of opportunity to obtain

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<sup>49</sup> This scenario is arguably what drives the currently dominant methodology of poverty assessment in affluent Western societies: it is now generally received wisdom that the phenomenon of poverty is not only a matter of absolute lack of essential goods, but possesses a relative dimension as well. See the OECD statistics on poverty in developed Western countries, which define relative poverty as *having less than half of the median income* in the society in question; cf. Michael Foerster and Marco Mira d’Ercole, Marco, “Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries in the Second Half of the 1990s,” *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers* 22 (2005), <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/48/9/34483698.pdf>, p. 3. Another possible reason for a relative poverty measurement could be that, under income inequality, markets might stop producing the goods that the worse off need, cf. Alan Ryan, “Does Inequality Matter – For Its Own Sake?,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 19 (2002): 225-243; p. 238. In such a case, money income becomes, to that extent, a positional good. It has to be taken care of by the general conception of justice, which has to trade off the absolute advantages in some goods introduced by inequality against the disadvantages suffered by the worse off in terms of positional goods (unless the positional goods in question are the equal social bases of self-respect). For a discussion of positional goods, cf. Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, “Equality, Priority, and Positional Goods,” *Ethics* 116 (2006): 471-497.

<sup>50</sup> As seen, Anderson emphasises the importance of discouraging status hierarchies, “What’s the Point of Equality,” pp. 318, 326, but discusses the distributive implications of this only for the special case of “the clothing one needs to appear in public without shame”, p. 320, thus obscuring the fact that her view may require much further-reaching distributive responses to the general problem of status norms.

<sup>51</sup> Adam Swift, *How Not to be a Hypocrite: School Choice for the Morally Perplexed* (London: Routledge 2003), and “The Morality of School Choice Reconsidered: A Response,” *Theory and Research in Education* 2 (2004): 323-342, Elizabeth Anderson, “Rethinking Equality of Opportunity: Comment on Adam Swift’s ‘How Not to Be a Hypocrite’,” *Theory and Research in Education* 2 (2004): 99-110, and “Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective,” *Ethics* 117 (2007): 595-622, Debrah Satz, “Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship,” *Ethics* 117 (2007): 623-

social positions and offices to which social and economic advantages are attached,<sup>52</sup> and applies to equality of opportunity in education only insofar as it is instrumental to the former. The previous sections have made clear that relational egalitarianism does not support a case for equality of opportunity for overall attainment of desirable goods in life, of which complete equality of educational opportunity would be an instance; it relies instead on a defeasible presumption that social goods, including education, ought to be distributed equally.<sup>53</sup> It does, however, require strictly that every member of society is given the educational resources necessary to be able to avoid relational injustice.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, justice does not require substantive equality of opportunity between individuals of equal talent and commitment across *all* positions in the socio-economic division of labour, as long as the social, economic and political spheres are generally organised in a manner that is beneficial to everybody (see section 2). This includes stringent measures against nepotism and corruption, and the effective eradication of discrimination on grounds of pre-identifiable group characteristics, such as sex, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, and disability (“formal” equality of opportunity). But it is no more a social injustice if equally talented and committed people do not make it into equal social positions, because they are differentially lucky at, e.g., meeting the right people at the right time, than it is if two people of equal attractiveness end up with unequally attractive partners for reasons beyond their control.

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

For reasons of avoidance of such domination, it is then imperative that the elite be highly permeable, and not constituted by persons predominantly drawn from a narrowly confined social class. Otherwise, it might degenerate into a closed sub-society of family dynasties and personal acquaintance, with its own norms of behaviour and social intercourse, which serve to exclude people from other social layers. In such a scenario, a body of privileged people in positions of power emerges, or maintains itself, who are neither sincerely willing nor able to properly take into account the interests of the people affected by their decisions.<sup>55</sup> This is a reason to give special attention to the development of talents from families and social backgrounds that have not hitherto had access to top positions; not out of considerations of individual fairness, but based on the wider social and political importance of the elite. At the same time, special attention to talents from such backgrounds clarifies the permeability of society not only to the talented people in question, but to all members of their social layers, and hence serves to discourage an attitude of servility and deference to the elite,<sup>56</sup> which in turn makes it less likely that the elite can get away with using the opportunities for power abuse that their positions will offer.

(Contd.)

648, and Harry Brighouse, and Adam Swift, “Educational Equality versus Educational Adequacy: A Critique of Anderson and Satz,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26 (2009): 117-128.

<sup>52</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 72.

<sup>53</sup> Defenders of an ideal of complete educational equality of opportunity based on luck egalitarian fairness also concede that their ideal has to be balanced against other values, see only Brighouse and Swift, “Educational Equality versus Educational Adequacy,” p. 118.

<sup>54</sup> Anderson, “What’s the Point of Equality,” pp. 318ff, 328.

<sup>55</sup> Anderson, “Fair Opportunity in Education,” pp. 598-606, 616.

<sup>56</sup> Satz, “Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship,” p. 625.

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

There is hence a status problem that cannot reasonably be regarded as fully eliminable, even if all positions in question are properly designed, all irrational status norms, discrimination and economically detrimental practices (such as nepotism and corruption) are abolished, and the link between wealth and status is broken. The problem exists hence even if social mechanisms have done everything they can to make sure that the people who occupy them really are the most qualified. It appears in two guises: first, it might be the case that the people who end up being most qualified for the positions in question predominantly come from certain social groups and layers – say, the upper and middle classes. People from disadvantaged backgrounds are effectively denied access, because they (or their parents) lack the resources to develop their talents properly. If this happens, they are, to this extent, marginalised and disenfranchised, and this is a reason for them to regard their self-respect as lowered, and to consequently regard themselves as social inferiors. This is another reason for relational egalitarians to devote substantial resources to offsetting the effects of disadvantaged background on the development of talents.<sup>57</sup>

But, second, what about those who, even under highly permeable social arrangements, would suffer from low self-respect, because they simply lack the talents needed to occupy a desirable position,<sup>58</sup> no matter how good a training they might be given? As said, it would be unreasonable to hope that differential social status can be abolished, and, in the case of status attached to positions of power, fewer counterstrategies seem available than in the case of income and wealth. But precisely because status differences cannot be eradicated, a relational egalitarian society should consciously and constantly seek to keep alive a sense of fundamental equality independent of people’s particular characteristics and achievements, and, to that extent, seek to break at least the link between status and self-respect. Any ideal of social and political ideal equality must emphasise “the irrelevance of individual differences for fundamental social and political purposes”.<sup>59</sup> This can happen symbolically, e.g., in political rhetoric, and in norms of everyday intercourse that influence the assignment of social

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<sup>57</sup> How far exactly this requirement approaches Rawlsian “fair equality of opportunity”, which demands the removal of all effects of social class on natural talent (*A Theory of Justice*, p. 63), is a question for further discussion. The right to a meaningful family life speaks against the removal of all family-transmitted advantage, at least insofar as it is non-financial. Both points are at least implicitly acknowledged by Rawls himself, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 64, 448.

<sup>58</sup> Scanlon, “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality,” p. 55.

<sup>59</sup> Scheffler, “What is Egalitarianism,” p. 22. Bernard Williams discusses a similar tension between equality of opportunity and equality as a *humanitarian* ideal, “The Idea of Equality”, in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge (UK), Cambridge University Press 1973), pp. 230-249, p. 247.

status. Ensuring that rewards attached to desirable social positions are moderate has a symbolical dimension as well.

## **Conclusion**

Social justice as relational equality requires setting stringent limits to distributive inequality: it recognises both intrinsic reasons of justice in favour of distributive equality in social goods between participants of equal standing in social cooperation, and a set of additional instrumental reasons for limiting distributive inequality, in order to avoid risks of unjust relationships, and the emergence of status norms that threaten the social bases of self-respect for the worse off. Material inequality and inequality of opportunity are not to the overall advantage of the worse off where they engender such risks.

Whether the relational egalitarian view of social justice is ultimately defensible – whether, e.g., the challenge from distributive desert mentioned in section 1, can be met – remains to be seen. Furthermore, other elements of it are still to be fleshed out, such as a detailed account of the notion of self-respect that it relies on. This paper has contributed to shaping the contours of such a view by clarifying its distributive implications; these implications are more demanding than both its proponents and its opponents currently think.

