

Relational Equality and Distribution

In egalitarian thought it has become commonplace to draw a contrast between two different ways of conceptualising the value of equality. On one model, equality is conceived as an essentially distributive value and, in that sense, a matter of what pattern of distribution qualifies as an equal one. On an alternative model, equality is understood in terms of an ideal of society in which persons relate to one another as having the status of equals. In keeping with the terminology used to frame this contrast in several of the important contributions to this area I will refer to these ways of conceiving of the value of equality as *distributive equality* and *relational equality* views respectively.

Whereas *distributive* equality, in G.A. Cohen's words, "take[s] for granted that there is something which justice requires people to have equal amounts of,"¹ *relational* equality, as Elizabeth Anderson puts it "seek[s] a social order in which people stand in relations of equality... in a democratic community as opposed to a hierarchical one."² Distributive equality views fit what Iris Marion Young refers to as the 'distributive paradigm' under which the value of equality concerns what the morally proper distribution of benefits and burdens among society's members should be.³ As Samuel Scheffler explains, such distributive views take their task to be "to identify the thing that justice requires us to equalize."⁴ Relational equality, on the other hand, instead of being a matter of identifying such a 'currency' to be equalised, is, as David Miller puts it, "a matter of how people regard one another and how they conduct their social relations."⁵ Thus conceived, relational equality is manifested by relationships in which persons regard and treat one another as equals, worthy of a certain kind of respect and status. A similar contrast is found in Cohen's discussion of the two principles that frame what he refers to as the socialist ideal.⁶ Under the socialist view in question, Cohen identifies a distributive principle – a principle of equality of opportunity which "seeks to correct for *all* unchosen disadvantages

[between persons]”⁷ – and a relational principle – a requirement of community which entails “that people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another.”⁸

One way of thinking about distributive and relational views of equality is as distinct but potentially compossible, and both of normative significance as elements in a plausible egalitarian vision of what the value of equality requires. From such a perspective, although it might be true that the requirements of distributive and relational equality may in practice conflict with one another, there is no fundamental principled inconsistency with their each representing dimensions of egalitarian concern. Contrastively, there are those who view distributive equality and relational equality as competitor principles of equality, not simply in the sense that their requirements might as a matter of contingency pull in different directions but in the sense that they, as it were, take one another’s space as accounts of what the value of equality consists in. Anderson’s claim that distributive egalitarians labour under a “flawed understanding of the point of equality”⁹ is illustrative of the competition I have in mind.

Here I defend the former way of thinking distributive and relational equality – that they can be seen as distinct but both of value. I do so primarily by responding to some influential reservations about each. In defence of the value of relational equality I respond to the claim that the relational conception can ultimately be understood in distributive terms. By clarifying the distinctiveness of a relational view I thereby offer support for the further claim that relations of equality do indeed have some value beyond equality conceived of in distributive terms. On the other side, and in defence of the value of distributive equality, I respond to recent relational equality challenges to the value of distributive equality which suggest that egalitarian considerations of distribution can be *internalised within* a plausible relational view. As such, distributive equality lacks normative importance beyond its contribution to egalitarian relations

of the right sort. While this position affirms the importance of distributions having a certain egalitarian flavour, in effect it renders questions of distribution subsidiary to the broader value of relational equality. The claim here is that relational equality thereby reflects the correct way to view the value of equality and the appropriately egalitarian distributions are determined *with reference to* that relational ideal, rather than via an appeal to an egalitarian distributive principle with any independent normative authority.

So, by arguing that a distributive rendering of the relational equality view is an impoverished one, and by arguing that the value of distributive equality is inadequately conceptualised as one that is subservient to a relational grounding, I aim to clarify their respective proper place in a form of egalitarianism that is sensitive to both distributive and relational considerations.

I Relational Equality as a distributive question

I first address a challenge to the relational equality view that it can ultimately be drawn in distributive terms. One influential convert to this view is Jonathan Wolff. In earlier work Wolff explores the above contrast between distributive and relational equality through a discussion of a conflict between fairness and respect.¹⁰ In line with popular egalitarian views in this context, Wolff understands fairness in terms of “the demand that no one should be advantaged or disadvantaged by arbitrary factors.”¹¹ He explains that “attempts to realize exact egalitarian fairness will undermine the respect of at least some [of its] citizens by treating them precisely in the way that inconsistent with respecting them, or allowing them to retain their self-respect.”¹² One way of viewing the potential for tension between fairness and respect, Wolff explains, is “as an instance of a broader conflict between distributive and social models of equality.”¹³ Viewed

as such, an excessive concern for distributive equality can undermine persons' sense of being a social equal with others and in that way undermine relational equality. In more recent work, however, Wolff argues that we should not see the conflict between fairness and respect as embodying a tension between competing egalitarian values. Instead he suggests we should understand it in terms of a conflict internal to the value of distributive equality. He writes: "I now think it is possible to reconcile a concern for both distributional and social equality by being clear about the goods social equality brings people, and having a wide enough concept of well-being, and a wide enough concept of distribution, so that these "goods" are also included as those to be distributed, at least indirectly."¹⁴

Concomitant claims are found in Wolff's work on disadvantage co-authored with Avner de-Shalit. They argue that what is of real importance is to "identify the goods which, once realised by equal relations, contribute to individual well-being."¹⁵ On the position defended by de-Shalit and Wolff, the kinds of things characteristically identified by relational equality views as of egalitarian importance – being respected by others, being conceived of as a social equal, understanding oneself as 'having a place in the world' – have that importance *as contributors* to individual wellbeing.¹⁶ In support of this, de-Shalit and Wolff suggest that if we cannot explain the value of equality in terms of some account of individuals' wellbeing, it's not clear what its value will consist in. As they put it, "unless it can be shown that social equality – such as relations of community and solidarity between people – is *good for the people* who live in that society, it is very hard to see its point"¹⁷ and that "social equality is not – or at least not only – some mysterious good in itself."¹⁸ There are two claims here, then. Firstly that a broad enough metric of wellbeing encompasses social relations; secondly that features of social relations that are not either part of that metric or do not affect it are not of egalitarian concern. Either way, the value of equality must be tied to the things that make individuals lives go better or worse.¹⁹

II The non-distributive value of Relational Equality

I suggest that focusing solely on distribution, even when engaging a very broad understanding of wellbeing, *does* miss something important about equality that is captured by the relational view. In short, I maintain that relational equality has a value that goes beyond its contribution to persons' own good.

Whilst others have similarly argued that the relational view resists distributive formulation they have not always done so in ways that have given a convincing explanation as to why. For instance, Samuel Scheffler rejects a distributive characterisation of relational equality, by explaining that relational equality consists in persons having "certain attitudes, motives and dispositions with respect to one another... and the point is not that these attitudes, motives and disposition must be distributed equally between the parties."²⁰ To bear this out, Scheffler emphasises that egalitarian social relations of the relevant sort will not obtain where "the parties possess those attitudes and dispositions to an equal but low degree."²¹ This much, however, won't suffice as a reply to de-Shalit and Wolff. Indeed the very same point is accepted by Wolff in spite of his arguing that the value of social relations can be characterised distributively. Wolff concludes that the value of relational equality cannot merely consist in the absence of social inequality and the *elimination* of relations of disrespect, hierarchy and servility because the absence of such sources of inequality is consistent with circumstances in which individuals are alienated from one another even though none enjoys great social status than any other.²² More generally, although Scheffler is no doubt correct to claim that relational equality does not consist in the *equal* distribution of relations or attitudes of something like respect, this doesn't show that relational equality can't be conceived in distributive terms. The distribution in question might well just be a sufficientarian²³ rather than an egalitarian one.

Here I offer a different account of the non-distributive character of relational equality. This is that what makes relational equality distinctively, and in that sense non-distributively, valuable is precisely that equal social relations have an impersonal value, even if it typically arises alongside things that are good for persons. A key dimension of difference between distributive and relational equality is, therefore, founded on the distinction between personal value – where the value in question lies in the contribution made to individuals' wellbeing – and impersonal value – where the value is not wholly reducible to the contribution made to individuals' wellbeing.²⁴

Now, we need to tread somewhat carefully here. After all, for many, distributive equality itself has impersonal value. That is to say, an equal pattern of distribution has value that is not reducible to the contribution that equality makes to individuals' wellbeing. Nevertheless, the goods that are to be distributed equally are themselves personal ones inasmuch as *they* have value as contributions to individuals' wellbeing. In contrast, I suggest, the goods in which at least part of the value of equality ultimately inheres on the relational view are impersonal ones.²⁵ None of this supposes that the impersonal value of egalitarian social relations on the one hand and the distribution of goods of personal value on the other will not be tied to one another in important ways. The point is that distributive equality is an equality of things which are good for persons, whereas (an important aspect of) relational equality is an equality within things which are valuable for other reasons.

To illustrate, consider some aspects of caring relationships. Now it's true that caring relationships characteristically involve personal values. Typically when I care for another person this might entail a certain set of attitudes or regard for their wellbeing; that I might feel some investment in how well their life goes and that I might do things to tend to their needs and

wants; considering and furthering their interests. From the perspective of the person who is the object of my care, they might be said to enjoy not only the obvious and tangible benefits of the treatment entailed by that care but also the consciousness of being cared for and apprehended by another as a worthy object of care; plausibly entailing an enhanced sense of self-worth and an appreciation of others in a way that is further life-enhancing for them. It seems clear that there are multiple dimensions in which relations of care and mutual care involve goods of personal value. However I think it would be a mistake to conclude that caring relations are valuable *only* because of the ways in which they enhance the wellbeing of individuals' lives. I would contend that there is something valuable about caring for others – that it is virtuous, good, meaningful – over and above its contribution to the wellbeing of either party. Roughly put, it is good that persons care for one another in a way that goes beyond its being good for them. The thought here is that dimensions of relations of social equality have a kind of value over and above their contribution to persons' wellbeing. This position will no doubt have its sceptics and, of course, all of this is very far from *establishing* that some such relations genuinely have this kind of impersonal value, let alone that the kind of egalitarian social relations championed by relational equality do. My ambition, at this stage, is simply to contend that this is a coherent and plausible way of understanding the value of relational equality in way that marks its distinctiveness from the distributive account.

To attempt to garner a modicum of further sympathy for this let me offer some brief remarks on a second case, drawn from some of Cohen's reflections on what it might mean to regard another as one's equal. Cohen asks what's involved in regarding another as an equal. He challenges the view that regarding another as an equal can be understood in terms of *being disposed to treat her* as an equal. This is partly for the reason that it is coherent to say, for instance, that "I regard him as an equal, but I'm too selfish (or biased) to treat him as one."²⁶ Similarly, I might regard someone as an equal but fail to understand how I might treat them in a way that is congruent

with that regard. Cohen gives the example of progressively minded former public schoolboys at Oxford who want to treat College cleaning staff – otherwise known as ‘scouts’ – as equals but don’t know how or, for some other reason, simply can’t.²⁷ Moreover, and importantly, regarding as an equal and treating as an equal might come apart in the converse manner – where I treat someone as an equal but do not regard them as such. Consider less progressive, more elitist minded public schoolboys, who as current decorum dictates treat their scouts with politeness and deference but who nevertheless still regard them as servants. In cases such as this, perhaps being treated as an equal in this way is seen as a marker of being regarded as an equal and, as such, scouts who are so treated reasonably believe that they are regarded as equals by the Oxford students they serve. Here the scouts labour under the misapprehension they are regarded as equals.

It strikes me that there is something regrettable and bad about this. Even though the concrete forms of treatment between the parties are befitting of those between equals, the regard in which one party holds the other is not. Moreover it does not seem to me that its badness primarily inheres in the damage to the wellbeing of either party. The scouts are unaware of being regarded as less than equal. Even if, on a capacious enough understanding of wellbeing, simply being held in lesser regard *is bad* for the scouts, I doubt that reducing its badness to this offers a satisfactory basis for thinking of it as a distinctively egalitarian badness.²⁸ Where persons are not respected or treated as equals there is an affront to their equal status that is not simply to be folded into the overall level of wellbeing persons enjoy.²⁹ I suggest that the affront is a further, impersonal badness that would obtain even if all other negative effects on their wellbeing could be compensated in a way that would satisfy distributive equality. There would be a residual badness, of a distinctively egalitarian character (the scouts not being respected *as an equal*) even where a wider distributive equality was realised (by compensating for any wellbeing loss for the scouts, if there is any).

As a rejoinder, it could be argued that any sense of residual badness we have concerning the scouts not being respected as equals need not be explained in terms of the *impersonal badness* of this lack of respect. Instead it could just be that the good of being respected as an equal (which the scouts to some degree lack) is non-substitutable with other goods. Thus understood, being respected as an equal is a personal good but one which cannot be compensated for by other goods. On this view, the residual bad-making feature that I have sought to capture with the notion of impersonal badness can be captured in other personal (and hence distributive) terms. I wonder, though, whether this view can make good sense of the putatively distinctively egalitarian character of this badness. If there are a number of goods other than 'being respected as an equal' which are similarly non-substitutable, then in the instances in which we cannot compensate for their loss, there are in principle any number of different dimensions in which people will be distributively better or worse off than one another in this very same way. So not being respected as an equal will not in this regard be of special egalitarian concern as a dimension of personal disadvantage.

It seems to me, then, that an important part of a plausible vision of relational equality should precisely be a concern with people regarding one another as equals and that the value of this is misconstrued if it is conceptualised solely in terms of the effect on the wellbeing of those who are to be so regarded.³⁰

III Relational Equality: Telic and Deontic dimensions

So much for the question of whether relational equality can be captured in distributive terms. I now want to respond to what in a manner of thinking is the return assault. More specifically, I argue that distributive equality has an importance that is independent from the value of relational equality and cannot thereby be subsumed under the latter approach. As a preliminary, I want to emphasise a hitherto underappreciated distinction between two different ways in which the requirements of distributive and relational equality might be in tension with one another.

The first way in which the requirements of distributive equality might undermine relational equality is one that I will refer to in terms of a *telic* impact on relational equality. The broad idea is that because the manifestation of relations of social equality is dependent on goods being distributed in certain ways and not others, independent distributive principles are liable to be in tension with the distributive requirements imposed by relational equality. Scheffler captures this thought succinctly when he says that “questions of distribution are important, for people who are committed to the social and political value of equality... because certain kinds of distributive arrangements are incongruous with that social and political value. Clearly, for example, people whose basic needs have not been met – people who lack adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, or medical care – cannot participate in political life or civil society on a footing of equality with others, or can do so only with great difficulty.”³¹ Here there are certain distributive prerequisites that provide persons with some kind of means to participate in ways that preserves their equal standing in the eyes of others. Anderson gestures in a similar fashion to ways in which certain distributions can negatively affect relational equality when she discusses cases in which “property is so unequally distributed that some adults live in abject dependence on others, and so live at the mercy of others.”³²

The second way in which a conception of distributive equality can be in tension with a relational view is what I will refer to as *deontic*. Here the general idea is that permitting, requiring or justifying certain distributive inequalities, perhaps on certain particular grounds, is *itself* inconsistent with treating, regarding or respecting persons as social equals. Anderson is perhaps the most forthright in pointing out the putative failures of certain distributive views of equality in this regard. She argues, for instance, that permitting people to fall into destitution due to entirely reasonable choices represents a failure to treat persons with respect. What is more, distributive views, like luck egalitarianism, entail principles that themselves, in Anderson's words, "express a contemptuous pity"³³ for citizens adjudged to be brute disadvantaged. Expressing pity for persons is inconsistent with respecting those persons as equals.³⁴ The concerns reflected here are not primarily that certain patterns of distribution might corrode equal social relations but that an actor's responsibility for some distribution, broadly construed, is itself a question of respecting others as equals. So the telic way of thinking about relational equality emphasises the manifestation of egalitarian relations of mutual equal respect and distributive and cultural preconditions for that manifestation, whereas the deontic way emphasises the responsibility of agents and institutions for treating people or expressing things that are inconsistent with the status of persons as equals.

Whilst both telic and deontic issues feature prominently in the literature, apart from a couple of exceptions the differences between them have not been adequately emphasised.³⁵ This omission has not only obfuscated a clearer picture of the character of relational equality but also hindered advancement towards an understanding of the ways in which distributive and relational views may or may not be congruent with one another. With the telic – deontic distinction in mind, in the following I offer a defence of distributive egalitarianism against a deontic challenge from Scheffler who proposes to show that because distributive questions are

addressed from within a relational ideal, freestanding principles of distributive equality lack normative purchase and should be discarded in favour of the richer relational vision of equality.

First I detail Scheffler's explanation of the relational view of equality and the sense in which it takes distributive questions as internal ones. Second I frame a general dilemma that pertains to addressing distributive issues internally from within a relational account. Third I suggest that the criteria that Scheffler imposes on relational equality requires the input of distributive considerations with independent normative authority. Fourthly I defend that claim by explaining how other dimensions of relational equality are insufficient to support egalitarian distributive conclusions themselves.

IV Scheffler and the Practice of Equality

When explicating the character of relational equality, Scheffler draws a picture of egalitarian personal relationships which he contends embodies the important dimensions of relations of equality more generally. He thereby takes it to represent an illuminating resource for comprehending equality so conceived at the political level.³⁶ In a passage that is worth quoting in full Scheffler explains the broad outline of such relations:

"In a relationship that is conducted on a footing of equality, each person accepts that the other person's equally important interests—understood broadly to include the person's needs, values, and preferences—should play an equally significant role in influencing decisions made within the context of the relationship. Moreover, each person has a normally effective disposition to treat the

*other's interests accordingly. If you and I have an egalitarian relationship, then I have a standing disposition to treat your strong interests as playing just as significant a role as mine in constraining our decisions and influencing what we will do. And you have a reciprocal disposition with regard to my interests. In addition, both of us normally act on these dispositions. This means that each of our equally important interests constrains our joint decisions to the same extent. We can call this the **egalitarian deliberative constraint**. It is a distinctively egalitarian element in the complex ideal of an egalitarian relationship."*³⁷

The egalitarian deliberative constraint (EDC) under which "each participant accepts that the other's comparably important interests should play a comparably significant role in influencing the allocation decisions that they make"³⁸ is of crucial import for the following analysis. To further illustrate the EDC Scheffler offers the example of a couple faced with decision as to where they choose to go on holiday when there are competing preferences between the two; one party wants to go to Rome, the other to Paris.³⁹ There are a range of solutions that are congruous with the egalitarian character of the relationship in question, including taking turns deciding where to go on holiday, splitting holiday time across respectively preferred options, going to a compromise destination, trading off getting one's favoured holiday against other goods subject to competing preferences, and others. The appropriateness of any given proposed solution will depend on certain further particularities of the relationship, its history and context. The point of relevance, though, is that only certain solutions and ways of approaching them are consistent with treating the other as an *equal partner* in the relationship, namely those that satisfy the EDC. Only when each party's interests are given relevantly equal weight in the determination of the decision, and where each are disposed to give the other's interests equal weight, do they treat one another as equals in the fullest sense. In this way the question of distribution (in this case of holiday time) is one that is internal to the egalitarian character of the relation itself.

There are a range of distributions that are consistent with relational equality but the EDC nevertheless disciplines distributions towards ones that have a certain egalitarian shape. However, Scheffler insists, although “on the relational view, there is strong general pressure within egalitarian personal relationships toward rough distributive equality of some kind... there is no reason to think that such relationships are regulated by any fixed distributive formula.”⁴⁰ What’s more – and this is the point worth emphasising – the normative authority of the distribution as one that is required by the value of equality does not rest upon an independent distributive egalitarian value but is derived from its congruence with egalitarian relations. To put it differently, a distribution has egalitarian value not because it conforms to a pre-specified pattern of a certain sort but because it is among that range of distributions that are required if relevant parties are to count as relating to one another as equals.⁴¹

Because the EDC is a general constraint on egalitarian relations, Scheffler takes it to apply not only to egalitarian personal relationships but also to social and political equality.⁴² Scheffler readily concedes that there are important differences between egalitarian personal relationships and relations of social and political equality but maintains that “the core content of the egalitarian constraint continues to apply.”⁴³ The take-home message from Scheffler’s view is that the egalitarian character of distributions is decided entirely from within the relational view and by addressing the question, from that perspective, as to what distributions would be congruent with relating to one another as equals. In Scheffler’s words, distributive equality is not a “*normatively autonomous* value.”⁴⁴ This thought is echoed by Anderson’s claim that for the relational egalitarian “The justice of distributions is derived from an independent standard of the justice of agents, which involves conformity to principles of justice that regulate their conduct.”⁴⁵ Whilst the argument I mount in the following is trained against Scheffler’s particular account of the EDC it has a broader import as a critique of relational views which contend that

egalitarian distributive considerations have an authority that is derived entirely from facets of relational equality. In that sense the argument of the paper does not depend on Scheffler's particular conception of relational equality and the content of the EDC that he puts forward, but contests the claim that a prior standard of relational equality bestows the relevant normative authority on egalitarian distributive principles.

V A Distributive Dilemma

Before arraying the substance of the case I make against the claims for relational equality from Scheffler and Anderson, first let me note a dilemma for the Scheffler view. In order to discern whether a given distributive decision passes the EDC and thereby counts as treating other persons as equals we need to know what counts as other members' equally important interests playing 'an equally significant role' in influencing that decision. Scheffler is explicit that there is no single answer to what passes for playing 'an equally significant role.'⁴⁶

This indeterminacy presents a dilemma. On the one hand the more restrictively one construes what is to count as according an 'equally significant role' to the interests of each other, the more likely it is that the set of distributions that pass the EDC will look intuitively plausible from an egalitarian perspective. However such a restrictive interpretation of the EDC looks as if it depends on an interpretation of 'equally significant role' that has certain egalitarian distributive content built-in from the outset. If so, the impression that distributive questions are settled by, and derive the authority of their answers from, independent relational considerations is a misleading one. Alternatively, to embrace the second horn, one could refrain from offering a too

restrictive specification of ‘according an equally significant role’ to interests, however then door is open to distributions which look likely to offend egalitarian sensibilities.

In fact, Scheffler considers a case that illustrates the challenge of this second horn. It might be argued, for instance, that forms of act-utilitarianism pass the EDC.⁴⁷ Though the emergent distributions might permit the sacrifice of some persons’ interests at the expense of others’, each person’s interests are accorded an equally significant role in the sense that they are assigned an identical weight in the consequentialist calculus that decides which distribution is required. And yet act-utilitarian distributions have the potential to involve radical inequalities. Scheffler’s manoeuvre in response to this does not, however, successfully *deal* with the dilemma so much as attempt to *dodge* it. To rule out distributions like those potentially advocated by act-utilitarianism, Scheffler implores us to consider the implications such distributions might have for our ability to forge and sustain ongoing relations of equality with others.⁴⁸ Such a thought has clear echoes of the kind of the widely recognised conflict between certain distributive configurations and the conditions required for relational equality. That act-utilitarian distributions have the potential to undercut relational equality in practice is eminently plausible. However, this simply alerts us to a *telic* conflict between distribution and relational equality. It fails to provide support for the distinctive claim of interest from Scheffler – that a certain deontic vision of what it is to treat persons as equals itself contains the resources to determine which distributions are suitably egalitarian. Of course, one might appeal to a Rawlsian “strains of commitment”⁴⁹ clause which rules out distributive principles that entail potentially unreasonable demands on some in respect of losing equal social status. Again, though, this appears to shift the distributive question rather than answer it. One could simply argue that egalitarian distributive principles are a further necessary resource on which to draw in order to inform an account of what counts as an unreasonable demand.

The above dilemma is therefore that either this account of relational equality is too thin to undergird sufficiently egalitarian distributions or it is thick in a way that belies the claim to derive egalitarian limits on distributions without appeal to a distributive principle of equality. Indeed, one might press a further and related doubt and question why the EDC is, in conjunction with other elements in the relational account, *sufficient* for treating others as equals, rather than merely being *necessary*. One can imagine a luck egalitarian, for instance, agreeing that the EDC is an important constraint on treating others as equals but maintaining that we only truly and fully treat others as equals by distributing in accordance with luck egalitarian principles.

There are two related doubts, then, addressed in the following: firstly whether the EDC can be filled out in a way that doesn't depend on invoking independent distributive principles, secondly whether, even if it can, the EDC is a sufficient rather than necessary constraint on treating others as equals.

Relational equality in the sense understood here is a complex ideal. I suggest that the most promising way to substantiate the claim that the appropriately egalitarian distribution is a matter settled entirely from within the relational perspective is to establish that the broader features of equal social relations *themselves entail* something like the EDC. This approach has two compelling features. Firstly it would establish a standard for 'treating others as equals' that does not require the invocation of independently authoritative distributive principles. Secondly because it offers a relational grounding for the EDC, it might be thought to offer a distinctively and normatively attractive basis for 'treating others as equals' that is potentially unavailable to further distributive principles that some might contend are *also necessary* in order to treat others as equals. To start making that case, I turn first, again, to the distinction Cohen draws between treating others and regarding others as equals.

VI Regarding, respecting and treating as equals

As previously noted, Cohen plausibly suggests that I can *treat* another as an equal – by addressing them respectfully, looking them in the eye, behaving in a way that takes due account of their interests – without *regarding* them as an equal – if, say, I do all of the above *only* to satisfy social expectations, or to get my own way in some regard.⁵⁰ Similarly, I can regard another as an equal without treating them as such if my moral imperfections mean that my recognition of others' equal status does not translate into the kind of equal treatment required by that recognition, or, as in the case of Cohen's well-meaning public schoolboys, my unrefined sensitivities frustrate my being able to do so.⁵¹ In a similar fashion, Scheffler himself appears to admit that I can endeavour but fail to satisfy the EDC. He explains that "what the deliberative constraint says is that the parties should treat (what are in fact) the equally important interests of each of them as having equal significance for their decisions. *This standard of importance is independent of and can diverge from their own judgments of importance*, even if they have no choice but to rely on those judgments. This means they can be mistaken in thinking they have complied with the constraint."⁵² The very fact that the EDC sets a standard of equal treatment that is independent of the judgments of the persons attempting to apply it indicates that treating persons as equals (in this respect, thus understood) is distinct from regarding them as equals, indeed even from *trying to* treat them as equals.

This is significant because I suspect that some of the mileage for the idea that we can derive principles of egalitarian distribution from an understanding of egalitarian relationships comes from the supposition that if we don't weigh each other's interests equally (as per the EDC), we simply fail to relate to one another as equals. In other words that the character of *relating* to one another as equals *itself involves* treating others interests in a certain way and distributing

accordingly. If I'm not willing in some way to treat my wife's interests as having some form of equal significance with my own, it's questionable whether our marriage is really an equal one. Now, there is certainly some truth to this, however relating to one another as equals involves *both* regarding and treating one another as equals and, while they are intimately entwined, it's not clear that part of what *it means* to regard someone as an equal is to treat them as such. If so – and this is the crucial point – even if both are integral parts of what it takes to *relate to* one another as equals, the relevant standard of equal *treatment* is not deducible from *regarding* as equal. Therefore this is all consistent with the idea, held by distributive egalitarians, that principles of distributive equality have normative authority in their own right the satisfaction of which might be necessary to treat (and hence relate to) persons as equals.⁵³ To put it slightly differently, principles of distributive equality set the standard for treating persons as equals as opposed to treating persons as equals determining the content of principles of distributive equality (via, say, being entailed by regarding others as equals).

Perhaps, in response, Scheffler could argue that regarding another person as an equal entails *the recognition of a reason* to treat them as an equal, even if it doesn't entail actually treating (or even being willing to treat them) as an equal. If so, this could be thought to support the idea that regarding another as an equal entails a recognition of something like the EDC and, in that way, show that regarding as an equal is the source of the normative authority of our distributive principles. However, if *this* is the sense in which the normative authority of principles of distributive equality are supposed to derive from relational considerations it's firstly unclear whether this is at odds with distributive egalitarianism, secondly it's not clear how it is that the EDC specifically is commended by such a manoeuvre. It seems quite consistent with the independent authority of egalitarian distributive principles to hold that it is our recognition of and regard for the equal status of others which gives us a reason to treat them as equals. The most that this establishes is that regarding others as an equal suggests a reason to treat them as

an equal; it doesn't in any way substantiate the EDC as *the relevant and sufficient standard* of equal treatment.

Conceivably, though, the richer, fuller explication of the character of egalitarian relationships that Scheffler provides carries more profitable resources for determining the content and authority of egalitarian principles of distribution. Scheffler characterises relational equality in terms of further values of *reciprocity*, *mutual respect*, *equal authority* and on a conception of *rights* and *responsibilities* of agents.⁵⁴ Possibly an EDC of the relevant sort can be distilled from these further elements. It might be argued, for instance, that only certain distributions are consistent with relations involving *reciprocal respect* and that those same values also counsel against being too definitive and precise as to the correct principles of distribution. In this way reciprocity and respect might support the EDC in the following ways – they place constraints on what can pass as an interpretation of 'equal weighting' for equal interests (thus providing some determinate content for the EDC), and, because they don't entail particular specific egalitarian distributive principles, they offer a relational grounding for the EDC that is not available to those further principles.

How might they do so? In fact, the notion of 'respect' is rather similar to notions of 'relating as equals' in that 'respect' can both concern how we *regard* another and how we *treat* them.

Understood in the former sense, respect seems to be a matter of *recognising* the other as an equal; an agent possessed of certain capacities and value.⁵⁵ This is, however, a question of what it means to *regard* the other as an equal which I have already argued will not itself support the EDC.

Respect, understood in the latter sense as a form of treatment, appears at first blush more promising. Imagine again Cohen's public schoolboy who, whilst he regards his cleaner 'scout' as an equal, asks her, because it's 'part of her job', to clean up his vomit following a night of over-exuberant alcohol consumption.⁵⁶ To demand that they fulfil this kind of unpleasant task, even where employed to do so, is plausibly a failure to treat the scout with respect as an equal. Similarly, as mentioned in the above, Wolff argues persuasively that attempts to realise distributive fairness might in some cases involve forms of treatment that are inconsistent with treating persons with respect, such as, in order to identify who is disadvantaged, requiring persons to reveal certain shameful facts about themselves.⁵⁷ So some distributions are flat-out inconsistent with treatment that takes seriously the others' equal status and value (demanding the scout clean avoidable vomit) and attempts to realise other egalitarian distributions require forms of treatment inconsistent with respectful treatment (demanding 'shameful revelation'). Insofar as relational equality embodies respectful treatment so conceived, this appears to be a promising basis for the EDC as a sufficient condition for egalitarian principles of distribution.

The first problem to note is that 'respect' constraints on distribution seem to arise only in a delimited set of cases. Considerations of respectful treatment are not always in conflict with the pursuit of particular and concrete egalitarian distributive principles and in cases where there is no conflict it's not clear why the EDC should be thought a sufficient condition for the authority of principles of distribution. More importantly, though, it's far from clear that invoking respect shows at all that egalitarian distributions *gain their authority* by being derivable from other elements of this complex ideal of relating to others as equals. Rather, the claim is that only by honouring certain *constraints*, grounded in the value of respect, can distributions appropriately reflect ways of treating persons as equals. It seems less plausible to say that the authority of the egalitarian principles is derivable from the ideal of respectful treatment itself than it does to think about this in terms of the values of respect and distributive equality as both being in play.

Thus understood, 'treating others as equals' is itself a complex notion that depends on appeal to notions of respect and appeal to distributive equality with independent normative authority.⁵⁸

Contrary to his own view, Scheffler's discussion of egalitarian personal relationships in fact suggests this way of thinking about the issues. He rightly explains how in the context of egalitarian relationships, keeping the EDC too clearly in view or interpreting it too rigidly by way of strict forms of scorekeeping have the propensity to erode the quality of the relationship.⁵⁹ If I keep a detailed record of how frequently my wife and I have done various household chores and start to make demands on her, based on those records, to do *precisely* her share this would undermine the give-and-take and rough equality that has value partly as a way of understanding and inhabiting the equal relationship and which is corroded by excessively attentive appeals to egalitarian claims we have against one another. However, just as this does not suggest that the EDC doesn't have value, so too it doesn't suggest that a rigid principle of distribution doesn't have value. Rather, it indicates that *precisely because* relational equality is a complex ideal, it engages multiple values under that broader ideal; values that might sometimes be in tension with one another. There might be an authoritative principle of fair distribution for household chores, it's just that there are good reasons for not governing our marriage too closely according to it.⁶⁰

This way of thinking about the role played by distributive principles – as independently authoritative considerations in the complex ideal of relational equality – is further supported by Scheffler's concession that the kind of scorekeeping that has the propensity to damage egalitarian personal relationships is not so much of a problem in the context of social and political equality.⁶¹ Scorekeeping is less likely to endanger valuable dimensions of egalitarian relations in socio-political context and for that reason should not be regarded as limiting so rigid and rigorous an application of the EDC or its concrete requirements. It seems like the

sensible thing to say here, though, is that whilst egalitarian distributive principles have general application as elements of what it takes to treat others as equals, other component parts of that broader ideal militate against too strict or frequent appeal to them in certain contexts. Again, though, it's not that distributive principles gain their normative authority because of the character of the egalitarian relations with which they are consistent, but that their pro tanto normative authority is considered against other valuable dimensions of those egalitarian relations. Scheffler's mistake here is to suppose that the context dependence of the appropriateness of certain distributions indicates that the demand to treat others as equals isn't regulated by any fixed distributive formula. This simply ignores the sense in which it is because relational equality is a complex ideal that any fixed distributive considerations will be subject to competition and moderation by other constitutive values.

VII Circumstances of relational equality

Let me consider a final appeal to defend the priority of the relational view over distributive egalitarianism. In the foregoing I considered Scheffler's claim that in order to discern whether a principle passes the EDC one question we can ask is whether the implications of that principle will be congruent with conditions under which persons live together and relate to one another as equals. To take a straightforward case, if emergent inequalities are too great this might have the propensity to foster perceptions of unequal status that are incompatible with regarding certain others as equals. I dismissed this appeal by explaining that it was an issue of a telic conflict between principles of distribution and the circumstances of relational equality, rather than a question of what it takes to *treat* other persons as equals. It might be, however, that I have underestimated Scheffler's appeal to the conditions necessary for social equality. Rather than supposing that otherwise permissible distributive principles are blocked because they

have practical implications that conflict with the circumstances of relational equality, one might see those circumstances as internally informing what counts as equal treatment.⁶² Because some distributions have a characteristic tendency to corrode circumstances of relational equality, some distributions fail to represent ways of treating one another as equals in virtue of their having this implication.

Even if such considerations can furnish the EDC with the resources to rule out certain distributive principles this doesn't in any way show that distributive egalitarian principles lack independent normative authority. Rather, as existing distributive egalitarian authors have shown, *principles of egalitarian distribution* can take account of the importance of relational equality without their normative authority being derived from relational equality. As Serena Olsaretti has persuasively argued, for instance, a responsibility-sensitive form of distributive egalitarianism has two dimensions: a commitment to equality of opportunity (under which only choice-derived inequalities are fair or just) and a 'principle of stakes' which, broadly speaking, tells us what consequences of choices individuals should be fairly held liable for/entitled to.⁶³ Similarly, as Zofia Stemplowska explains, it is one thing to affirm that egalitarian distributive principles require equality of options, it is a further question what forms of disadvantage they are justly subject to as a result of choices.⁶⁴ And, indeed, in different ways both Olsaretti and Stemplowska have explicitly reflected on the import of relational equality for a distributive egalitarian account of stakes.⁶⁵

In short, as both Olsaretti and Stemplowska show, it is open to forms of distributive egalitarianism to draw on relational equality as a resource that partly determines principles of stakes. This falls far short of saying that the authority of principles of egalitarian distribution is derived from relational equality but merely shows how distributive principles can internalise considerations of egalitarian social relations. To put it slightly differently, none of this suggests

that the relational perspective renders distributive principles themselves normatively inert, it shows that distributive principles with their own normative authority can guide what counts as equal treatment by being informed by values concerning how we relate to one another as equals. If this is true then the anticipated defence of Scheffler we have been considering fails. It fails because even if it's the case that certain candidate egalitarian distributive principles are ruled out on the basis of the implications they have for relational equality, existing distributive egalitarian accounts already illustrate that this need not deprive egalitarian distributive principles of independent normative authority.

VIII Conclusion

I have defended the distinctive value of both distributive equality and relational equality. On the one hand I have presented the view that there is something of genuine and distinctively impersonal value that inheres in relational equality that is misconceived as something distributive. On the other hand, though egalitarian principles of distributive equality might be characterised as a part of a broader ideal of relating to others as equals, this does not suggest that they derive their authority from that ideal but, rather, should be seen as constitutive elements with a normative authority of their own. We should therefore deny that there is a normative priority of the relational over the distributive in that specific sense. The conclusion is, then, that there is a plausible way of thinking about distributive and relational equality that conceptualises them as distinct but both valuable – where the latter is not reducible to a component of the former, and where the former is not a mere subsidiary principle of the latter. The interrelation between relating to one another as equals, regarding one another as equals, treating one another as equals, and distributive considerations that bear on all of the foregoing is an eminently complex one – and traverses a series of questions and issues on which further

work would no doubt prove fruitful. What I have suggested, though, is it is unhelpful to try to understand each respective way of thinking about equality through the lens of the other.

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at an Oxford Workshop on Equality and the Warwick CELPA seminar. I am very grateful to the participants of both events for the improvements to the paper those discussions undoubtedly provoked. I am also very grateful to three anonymous reviewers for valuable written comments.

¹ G. A. Cohen, "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," *Ethics* 99 (1989), 906 – 944 at p. 906.

² Elizabeth Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics* 109 (1999), 287 – 337 at p. 313.

³ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 1990), at p 15.

⁴ Samuel Scheffler, "The Practice of Equality," in C. Fourie, F. Schuppert, and I. Wallinmann-Helmer (eds.), *Social Equality: Essays on What it Means to be Equals* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 21 – 44.

⁵ David Miller, "Equality and Justice," *Ratio X*, (1997), 222 – 237 at p 224.

⁶ G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton University Press, 2009)

⁷ Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* pp. 17 – 18, his emphasis.

⁸ Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* pp. 34 – 35.

⁹ Anderson, "What is the Point?" p. 288

¹⁰ Jonathan Wolff, "Fairness, Respect and the Egalitarian Ethos," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 27 (1998), 97 – 122.

¹¹ Wolff, "Fairness and Respect," p. 106.

¹² Wolff, "Fairness and Respect," p. 107.

¹³ Jonathan Wolff, "Fairness, Respect and the Egalitarian Ethos Revisited," *The Journal of Ethics* 14 (2010), 335 – 350.

¹⁴ Wolf, "Revisited," p. 347. See also Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, "Luck egalitarians versus relational egalitarians: on the prospects of a pluralist account of egalitarian justice," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*

42 (2015), 220 – 241, at p 221; Jonathan Wolff, “Disability Among Equals” in K. Brownlee and A. Cureton (eds.) *Disability and Disadvantage* (Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. pp. 121 – 123.

¹⁵ Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit, *Disadvantage* (Oxford University Press, 2007), at p. 6. See also Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, “Luck egalitarians versus relational egalitarians: on the prospects of a pluralist account of egalitarian justice,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 42 (2015), 220 – 241; Jonathan Wolff, “Disability Among Equals” in K. Brownlee and A. Cureton (eds.) *Disability and Disadvantage* (Oxford University Press, 2009), esp. pp. 121 – 123.

¹⁶ Whether because they are constitutive of wellbeing or they affect other dimensions of it.

¹⁷ Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*, p. 6, my emphasis.

¹⁸ Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage*, p. 6. To be clear, the claim from Wolff and de-Shalit is not that ‘Equality’ as a value must be good for people but that the goods people are equal in respect of must be.

²⁰ Scheffler, “Practice of Equality,” p. 31.

²¹ Scheffler, “Practice of Equality,” p. 31.

²² Jonathan Wolff, “Disability Among Equals,” in K. Brownlee and A. Cureton (eds.) *Disability and Disadvantage*, (Oxford University Press, 2009) pp. 112 – 137, at p. 122

²³ For a classic statement see Harry Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” *Ethics* 98 pp. 21 – 42.

²⁴ See, for instance, Larry Temkin, *Inequality* (Oxford University Press 1993) esp. ch. 9 and Larry Temkin, ‘Egalitarianism Defended’, *Ethics* 113, pp. 764 – 782. For other work that emphasises the impersonal value of relational equality see Gideon Elford, ‘Equality of Status and Distributive Equality’, *Journal of Value Inquiry* 46, pp. 353 – 367 and Martin O’Neill, ‘What Should Egalitarians Believe?’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 32, pp. 119 – 156.

²⁵ To be clear, then, my claim here is not that egalitarian social relations are *good for* society (though they might be) as opposed to the individual, it’s that they can be seen to have a value over and above their being good for anyone, whether that is the society or the individual.

²⁶ G. A. Cohen, “Notes On Regarding People as Equals,” in his *Finding Oneself in the Other* (Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 193 – 200, at p. 197.

²⁷ Cohen, “On Regarding,” p. 197.

²⁸ Nor, I don’t think, is this lack of regard for the equality of the scouts regrettable and bad because it is bad for the elitist students. It might, of course, be bad for the elitist students but my sense is that the chief

source of the badness of is not the effect on the wellbeing of those students but a kind of wrongness (if that is the right way to characterise it – and I make no claims about blameworthiness here) of sorts *against* the scouts.

²⁹ I leave aside whether there are some actions people take which could *warrant* their not being respected or treated as an equal

³⁰ The abstract character of this account of the value of relational equality is both interesting and surprising given that the relational critique of distributive equality has sometimes involved casting aspersions on its abstract merely arithmetical quality. I'm grateful to Matthew Clayton for drawing my attention to this.

³¹ Scheffler, "What is Egalitarianism?" p. 23.

³² Anderson, "What is the Point?" p. 315.

³³ Anderson, "What is the Point?" p. 289.

³⁴ Anderson, "What is the Point?" p. 306.

³⁵ Patrick Tomlin distinguishes the evaluative value of equal relations from their normative value in a way that reflects this distinction between telic and deontic. See Tomlin, "What is the Point of Egalitarian Social Relationships?" in Kaufman (ed.) *Distributive Justice and Access to Advantage. G. A. Cohen's Egalitarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 151 – 179. See also Kristin Voigt and Gry Wester, "Relational Equality and Health," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 31 (2015), pp. 204 – 229, who note that views on relational equality have been developed in broadly two directions which roughly reflect the distinction between telic and deontic I have in mind.

³⁶ Scheffler, "Practice of Equality," pp. 24 – 31.

³⁷ Scheffler, "Practice of Equality" p. 25.

³⁸ Scheffler, "Practice of Equality," p. 33.

³⁹ Scheffler, "Practice of Equality," p. 25.

⁴⁰ Scheffler, "Practice of Equality," p. 35.

⁴¹ A like thread runs through Thomas Pogge's understanding of relational equality, who maintains that "treating recipients justly does not boil down to promoting the best distribution among them – what matters is how social rules treat, not how they affect, the set of recipients." Thomas Pogge, "Relational Conceptions of Justice: Responsibilities for Health Outcomes," in Sudhir Anand, Fabienne Petere and

Amartya Sen (eds.) *Public Health, Ethics, and Equity* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 135 – 161, at p. 149.

⁴² Scheffler, “Practice of Equality,” p. 35.

⁴³ Scheffler, “Practice of Equality,” p. 37.

⁴⁴ Scheffler, “Practice of Equality,” p. 41, his emphasis.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Anderson, “The fundamental disagreement between luck egalitarians and relational egalitarians,” in A. Kaufman ed. *Distributive Justice and Access*, pp. 21 – 39, at p. 22.

⁴⁶ Scheffler, “Practice of Equality,” p. 28. It’s not merely that there is no single answer because every answer will be context dependent but that that in any given context multiple answers may be available.

⁴⁷ Scheffler, “Practice of Equality,” p. 40.

⁴⁸ Scheffler, “Practice of Equality,” pp. 40 – 41.

⁴⁹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. edn. (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 153 – 154.

⁵⁰ Cohen, “Notes on Regarding,” p. 197. Cohen gives the example of treating a war criminal as an equal without regarding them so.

⁵¹ Cohen, “Notes of Regarding,” p. 197.

⁵² Scheffler – Practice of Equality p 30, my emphasis.

⁵³ For a clear and compelling outline of luck egalitarianism conceived of in terms of a set of deontic duties along such lines see Peter Vallentyne, ‘Justice, interpersonal morality, and luck egalitarianism’, in in Kaufman (ed.) *Distributive Justice and Access to Advantage. G. A. Cohen’s Egalitarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 40 – 49.

⁵⁴ Scheffler, “Practice of Equality,” pp. 24 – 25.

⁵⁵ For more on recognition as respect see, for instance, Stephen Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” *Ethics* 88, 36 – 49; Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution of Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso 2003); Axel Honneth, “Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition,” *Political Theory* 20, 197 – 201; Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in A. Gutmann ed. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25–73.

⁵⁶ Cohen is tentative as to whether failures to treat persons as equals along such lines are consistent with regarding them as equals. He considers the scout saying “[H]e claims to regard us as equals, but he sees

nothing wrong with me cleaning his toilet and him not cleaning mine” and suggests a “pretty special story” is needed for how in such cases I regard the scout as an equal. See Cohen, “Notes on Regarding,” p. 200. I agree, but I think this is because demanding either undignified or subservient work is *characteristically associated* with a failure to regard the other as equal. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, it might indeed be true that I fail to regard the scout as an equal if I ‘see *nothing* wrong’ with their cleaning my toilet, but this isn’t because in fact being required to clean my toilet is inconsistent with my regarding them as an equal but because of my failure to comprehend a dimension of badness (the *something* wrong) in their being required to do so.

⁵⁷ Wolff, “Fairness, Respect,” p. 109.

⁵⁸ Indeed this appears to be Wolff’s view when he argues that both fairness and respect are distinctively egalitarian values, see Wolff, “Fairness, Respect,” p. 103.

⁵⁹ Scheffler – Practice of Equality p 30

⁶⁰ It’s possible that personal reflection on the principle in question is appropriate (say when trying to make sure one is doing no less than one’s fair share) even if it can be problematic to explicitly invoke it when deliberating together as marital partners or pressing claims against the other. I’m grateful to an anonymous review for suggesting this.

⁶¹ Scheffler – Practice of Equality p 39

⁶² Much as in the way, say, consequentialist theories of rights are structured.

⁶³ Serena Olsaretti, “Responsibility and the Consequences of Choice,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 109, 165 – 188.

⁶⁴ Zofia Stemplowska, “Making Justice Sensitive to Responsibility,” *Political Studies* 57, 237 – 259.

⁶⁵ Serena Olsaretti, “Rescuing Justice and Equality from Libertarianism,” *Economics and Philosophy* 29, 43 – 63; Zofia Stemplowska, “Responsibility and Respect: Reconciling Two Egalitarian Visions,” in C. Knight, Z. Stemplowska (eds.) *Responsibility and Distributive Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 115 – 135.