

Do We Have Relational Reasons to Care About Intergenerational Equality?

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ABSTRACT

Relational egalitarians sometimes argue that a degree of distributive equality is necessary for social equality to obtain among members of society. In this paper, we consider how such arguments fare when extended to the intergenerational case. In particular, we examine whether relational reasons for distributive equality apply between non-overlapping generations. We claim that they do not. We begin by arguing that the most common reasons relational egalitarians offer in favour of distributive equality between contemporaries do not give us reasons to object to distributive inequality between non-overlapping generations. This argument by itself however will not fully suffice to show that there are no relational reasons to care about intergenerational distributive equality, given the nature of relational equality and its requirements in the intergenerational case are likely to be qualitatively different than in the contemporary case. Therefore, we also make the positive argument that for the intergenerational case to satisfy the requirements demanded by the ideal of relational equality it suffices that future persons' interests are meaningfully incorporated and protected in the decision-making of preceding generations, and there is no basis for a concern with distributive equality. While some have argued that the one-way and asymmetrical causal influence between non-overlapping generations means concerns of social equality are inapplicable in the intergenerational case, we argue that the ongoing nature of this influence makes concerns of social equality appropriate. If successful, the upshot of the argument is that it can be coherent to maintain a commitment to relational equality between non-overlapping generations, all while remaining agnostic about distributive equality between them.

KEYWORDS: relational equality; distributive equality; social relations; future generations

Introduction

In recent years relational equality has received significant attention from philosophers, particularly as a response to what is seen by some as the shortfalls of distributive (especially luck) egalitarianism.¹ Although there is some work on whether distributive equality matters

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between non-overlapping generations (Mazor 2010; Wolf 2021; Finneron-Burns 2023), little has been said about the feasibility of an account of relational equality between generations. Moreover, when relational equality between generations is mentioned, its feasibility is dismissed rather quickly (e.g., see Bidadanure 2016: 249; Kolodny 2014: 292-293).

The focus of this paper is the relationship between distributive equality and relational equality intergenerationally. By distributive equality (sometimes also referred to as material equality or substantive equality (Scanlon 2000; Scanlon 2018)), we mean an equal distribution of some currency like income, welfare, resources, opportunities, primary goods, and so on. By relational equality, we mean a state in which people relate to one another as equals. Relational egalitarians are not at base concerned with individuals having equal amounts of ‘stuff,’ but are instead concerned with bringing about the kinds of social relations in which individuals’ status as an equal can be confirmed, in part through the absence of nefarious relations of domination and norms of deference and servility. Juliana Bidadanure nicely describes this difference of focus between distributive and relational egalitarians:

[W]hile distributive egalitarians believe that it is a moral requirement of justice that people get an equal amount of X (other things being equal), relational egalitarians believe that the point of equality is the realization of a community where people are able to stand in front of each other as equals” (Bidadanure 2016: 236).

However, the different outlooks between the two approaches does not imply that relational egalitarians regard a concern with distributive equality as moot. It is just that the relational egalitarian concern with substantive equality is not ‘distributively self-sufficient’ (Scheffler 2014: 41-42) but is instead based on distributive equality being necessary in order to achieve social relations of equality. As Martin O’Neill (2008: 129-130) outlines the idea: “we need not view ourselves as facing a strict dichotomy between ideals of social equality and ideals of distributive equality; rather, we can see the former as providing a foundation for the latter, via the provision of [a] set of ... reasons that count in favour of distributive equality.”² Consider an example: if property holdings in society are wildly unequal, then the concern for the relational egalitarian is not the unequal distribution of property *per se*, but how such an unequal distribution leads to dominating relationships between the haves and the have-nots. Claims of this sort are offering relational reasons for distributive equality, and they are found in a wide range of relational egalitarian views (Scanlon 2000; O’Neill 2008; Schemmel 2011; Schemmel 2012; Scheffler 2014; Scanlon 2018; Moles and Parr 2019; Cass 2024). Even Elizabeth Anderson’s account of democratic equality, which more famously offers reasons in support of sufficientarian distributions (Anderson 1999: 318-319, 325; Casal 2007: 322), also suggests there are times when distributive equality is instrumentally valuable to the goal of relational equality (Anderson 1999: 326; Anderson 2007 266-268; Anderson 2012: 53-54).

This paper argues that there are no relational reasons for distributive equality between non-overlapping generations. We defend this thesis in two parts. First, we argue that the most common reasons offered by relational egalitarians for distributive equality between contemporaries do not give us reasons to object to distributive inequality between non-overlapping generations. That is, these reasons do not just automatically travel over to the intergenerational case. This argument by itself however will not fully suffice to show that there are no relational reasons to care about intergenerational distributive equality, given the nature of

relational equality and its requirements in the intergenerational case are likely to be qualitatively different than in the contemporary case. As such, in the second section we outline that for the intergenerational case to satisfy the requirements demanded by the ideal of relational equality—no individuals hold unchecked and unaccountable power over others and individuals’ attributes and interests are given the consideration that is due to their status as equals—it suffices that future persons’ interests are meaningfully incorporated and protected in the decision-making of preceding generations, and there is no basis for a concern with distributive equality. The third section then responds to a worry that because the relations between non-overlapping generations are necessarily one-way and asymmetrical, then the very social relations that are necessary to ground an account of social equality in the first place are not present, and so applying concerns of relational equality to the intergenerational case is committing a kind of category error. We argue that while it would be inappropriate to apply standards of social equality to all types of one-way causal influences, it can be appropriate when this influence is ongoing, such as in the intergenerational case.

The upshot of the argument is that it can be coherent to maintain a commitment to relational equality between non-overlapping generations, all while remaining agnostic about distributive equality between them. Nothing we say in this paper denies that there might be non-relational reasons for distributive equality between non-overlapping generations.³ Furthermore, we are taking no stance on the relative attractiveness of relational and distributive egalitarianism,⁴ but only arguing that there is no relational basis to care about intergenerational substantive equality.

Relational reasons for distributive equality don’t travel across generations

There are several reasons why relational egalitarians care about distributive equality. The most common of these are based on distributive equality’s relationship with: 1) *Nondomination*; 2) *Status*; 3) *Equality of Opportunity*; and 4) *Equal Concern*. Before considering whether these reasons apply in the intergenerational case, it is worth noting that while relational egalitarians vary in the emphasis or the priority they accord to these different reasons, because the relevance of each of the values picked out in 1) through 4) to the concept of relational equality is uncontroversial, these reasons to care about distributive equality ought to be applicable to relational egalitarians generally. To illustrate, these reasons are offered by relational egalitarians who give different answers on why relational equality is something that is valuable—say because it’s linked to freedom (Anderson 1999), self-respect (O’Neill 2008; Schemmel 2011), community (Scanlon 2000; O’Neill 2008), or human flourishing (Scheffler 2005)—as well as the kind of value that relational equality has—be it personal value (Scanlon 2000; Scheffler 2005), impersonal value (O’Neill 2008), or instead deontic value based on what persons are owed (Anderson 1999; Scanlon 2000; Schemmel 2011; Kolodny 2014).⁵ The subsequent discussion then is picking out a concern that is not unique to just one particular conception of relational egalitarianism.

The concern with 1) *Nondomination* is based in the first instance on the claim that it is inconsistent with relations of equality for certain agents to have unequal and unaccountable power or control over others. The subsequent claim is that material inequality results in such power asymmetries between the haves and the have-nots. Relational egalitarians worry that

distributive inequality results in unaccountable power or control in two (interrelated) domains, each of which is significant enough to result in domination.

The first of these is power in civil society. As T. M. Scanlon argues, when “a small number of people control almost all of the wealth in a society, this can give them an unacceptable degree of control over where and how others can work, what is available for them to buy, and in general what their lives will be like” (Scanlon 2018: 6; see also 2000: 44; O’Neill 2008: 122; Maas 2020 & 2023). With a large gap between the haves and the have-nots, the less advantaged have fewer life opportunities and are forced to align many facets of their lives according to terms dictated by others, and are often forced to accept unfair terms of cooperation such as working for extremely low wages if no other jobs are available.

Relational egalitarians also worry about distributive inequality leading to unequal political power (Anderson 1999; Laborde 2010; Schemmel 2011; Scanlon 2018). This is because the wealthy can gain political office and influence in a way the worse off cannot. Now, it is of course true that reducing distributive inequality is not the only way to prevent the wealthy having inordinate political power. As Elizabeth Anderson outlines, procedural barriers could instead be put in place to prevent the conversion of wealth into political influence in the first place (1999: 326). But it is difficult to believe such barriers could suffice as a means prevent unequal political power, as Anderson herself recognizes (2007: 266-267; 2012: 54). This might be because other relational egalitarian values—like respecting freedom—will put limits on appropriate state action (making elections publicly funded is one thing, but stopping the wealthy inviting who they want to their dinner parties?), or, because the long-term effectiveness and stability of such measures will be fragile insofar as large wealth inequality remains (Schemmel 2011: 379-380). Indeed, the worry about effectiveness seems especially sharp once we appreciate material advantage generates political influence not only directly through things like political donations and the like, but also indirectly through the structural linkages between economic policy and the interests of the wealthy. Take for instance how powerful firms exploit their market position to use the threat of exit to dictate ‘business-friendly’ policy (Barry 2002; Christiano 2010). No barriers can prevent *that* kind of political influence, and so a concern with distributive equality will still be necessary.

However, these links between material inequality and domination do not apply between non-overlapping generations since unequal distributions between generations do not create the conditions in which one generation could control another. Take first the power to control life options. It is of course true that earlier generations will always exercise a degree of power and control over future generations. Thanks to ‘time’s arrow’, future people’s options will always be at least partially determined by decisions made by people today—the technology we develop, the plans and projects we begin, the resources we do or do not deplete, and so on. As we will see, the effects of this and whether it can be mitigated are important to any discussion about what intergenerational relational equality might look like. But what is relevant here is that decisions affecting the relative material levels of future generations do not seem special. All else being equal, a present generation has no more power and control over a worse-off future generation than it does over one that is equally well off, and later generations being significantly better off than their predecessors in no way gives them any power to control those who have come before them. While absolute levels might be relevant to control (a future generation with a high material standard might be able to better adapt and overcome the circumstances brought about by the actions of preceding generations compared to a counterfactual where they are poorer), the relative level *between* generations makes no difference. And similar points apply to political

power. While the failure of the present generation to institutionally include future generations' interests in political decisions might constitute an undue form of political control that is relevant to relational equality (more on this later), economic inequality between generations itself does not give one generation the ability to affect institutions in a way that would produce unequal political power.

The concern with 2) *Status* is that economic inequalities influence prevailing social norms about acceptable standards of living, resulting in the worst-off being assigned inferior social status in virtue of their inability to 'acceptably' present themselves (Scanlon 2000: 43; O'Neill 2008: 126-129; Laborde 2010: 52; Schemmel 2011: 380-383; Scanlon 2018: 5). This does not mean that any and all distributive inequality is impermissible. Rather, economic inequalities become problematic when they are so great that they cause attitudes of shame among the disadvantaged and unworkably poor relationships between citizens such that there is no basis for mutual respect between them. Among contemporaries, this is surely a concern. While Adam Smith (1850: 393) talked of needing a linen shirt and leather shoes to appear in public without shame, Scanlon (2018: 30) refers to an example of an African American woman who was ignored and disrespected by the employees at the welfare office until she appeared in recognizably "designer" clothes. In contrast to the concern with *Nondomination*, the issue here is not so much how material inequality gives certain identifiable agents the capacity to do certain things to one another, but how material inequality's effect on prevailing norms undermines the equal status that any relational egalitarian theory demands (Scanlon 2000: 52-53; Schemmel 2011: 381).

However, it is difficult to see how humiliating differences of status resulting from material inequality would occur between non-overlapping generations given the two groups (different generations) do not mutually interact. Being humiliated by differences in material well-being requires more than just knowing that someone is (or was or will be) better off than you are. Rather it requires some sort of shared social space, a negative environment that is produced by the unequal circumstances and unequal interactions between the better off person and the worse off person in order to mark the worse off person as inferior or make them feel ashamed. But because such interaction is not possible with non-overlapping generations (there is no shared environment for these judgements to be made), this particular relational reason for equality is not applicable. Niko Kolodny agrees: "When, in optimistic moods, I imagine that posterity will have much greater wealth than I have, no question of social superiority or inferiority makes sense. I am not in any recognizable way 'subordinate' to my great-grandchildren" (Kolodny 2014: 292-293).⁶ All this is not to say it is not possible for any (in)action or behaviour by previous generations to undermine the equal status of future generations (e.g., climate change inaction, see McKinnon 2011: 207-209), but that distributive inequality between generations in and of itself will not undermine persons' status in a way analogous to what occurs among contemporaries.

A potential objection to our claim that material inequality does not generate concerns related to *Nondomination* or *Status* in the intergenerational context, is that we have ignored how generations do not in fact exist in isolated cohorts, but rather overlap with each other. Indeed this fact is increasingly leveraged by writers using 'zipper arguments,' where the obligations one birth cohort has to a later but overlapping one is then used to derive obligations regarding future non-overlapping generations (for examples, see: Mazor 2010; Heath 2013; Gheaus 2016; Meijers 2023). Applying the logic of zipper arguments to the case at hand, if Generation A and Generation B overlap, then this contemporaneity would produce a case for (at least some degree

of) distributive equality between them grounded on *Nondomination* or *Status*. Furthermore, the same reasons would ground a case for (at least some degree of) distributive equality between the overlapping Generation B and Generation C, and so on down the line. The argument goes then, that this iterative concern with distributive equality between overlapping cohorts, can then be used to produce a concern with distributive equality between non-overlapping generations. If equality between A and B matters, and equality between B and C matters, then equality matters between A and C as well. The case for distributive equality between A and C would still be based on a concern with the character of social relations, just not the social relations between A and C.

However, the issue with relying on a zipper argument in this way is that it fails to offer any kind of limit to the inequalities between distant generations. This is because the arguments from *Nondomination* and *Status* do not require absolute distributive equality between parties; they entail only that the inequalities are not so vast as to create situations in which the worse off are subject to unchecked power by the better off or are humiliated. This means that Generation B could be somewhat better off than Generation A and Generation C could be somewhat better off than Generation B. This would be permissible because these small differences would not be enough to generate *Nondomination* or *Status* problems between the overlapping generations. However, these small differences could easily compound over time to create enormous inequality between Generation A and Generation Z (for example). If Generation A and Generation Z were overlapping, then such a large inequality would of course be objectionable for reasons of *Nondomination* and/or *Status*. But since they are not, there would be no relational reason to lament this inequality, *no matter how large it becomes*. Such a zipper argument seems to fail to provide a robust concern with distributive equality between non-overlapping generations.

The above two relational reasons for distributive equality require only a basic form of social interaction to get off the ground. The remaining reasons, *Equality of Opportunity* and *Equal Concern*, however, rely on the existence of cooperation that takes a more institutionalized form. The cooperation that occurs within the institutions of the state—such as shared political institutions, or participation in a shared economy—is what first comes to mind, but *Equality of Opportunity* and *Equal Concern* reasons can also apply in principle to the institutions of less ‘formal’ cooperation—such as working together to achieve some shared goal—so long as it creates defined roles, can be used as the basis of expectations, brings individuals into relations of mutual interdependence, and so on (O’Neill 2008: 122 n10). Unfair treatment within these institutions is then taken as relationally problematic because it expresses a kind of disrespect and failure to take the interests of others as an equal into account (Anderson 2010: 3-6; Scheffler 2014: 35-6). This coheres with how many relational egalitarians use the notion of society as a fair system of cooperation between free and equal citizens as the egalitarian ideal against which normative judgements can be made, including judgements about distributions (Anderson 1999; Scheffler 2005: 18-23; Schemmel 2011: 370-375). But given that it is not obvious that there is a single framework which brings members of non-overlapping generations together under the same cooperative banner and which could enforce this sort of procedural fairness, this means we can say from the get-go that it is going to be more difficult for these reasons to apply in the intergenerational case.

The relational concern here is that distributive inequality, by violating the requirements of fairness embodied in *Equality of Opportunity* and *Equal Concern*, prevents individuals’ relationship with their fellow citizens being of an egalitarian character.⁷ The claim behind

Equality of Opportunity is that it is only when individuals can compete for positions on fair terms that any gains will be legitimate, as when they are not the civic relations between individuals reduce to those of taking advantage/being taken advantage of—like a rigged game where only certain participants have a chance of winning. And given the way economic opportunities are sensitive to income and wealth, in combination with the fact the set of such opportunities is finite and often related to positional goods, distributive inequality itself will directly undermine equality of opportunity (Schemmel 2011: 385-389; Scanlon 2018: 6). This then undermines relations of equality even if those who don't enjoy the same opportunities for positions are not dominated or subjected to the control of the powerful (Scanlon 2000: 44).

But when applied to the intergenerational case, it is unclear how unequal material circumstances between generations could impact a person's prospects of success in the relevant way. While the kinds of work opportunities available over time of course vary (we have less opportunity to be a blacksmith today than if we existed two hundred years ago), material inequality between generations does not create an unfair procedure for access to positions. This is because individuals from different generations are not competing for the same positions, only contemporaries are. And this is true even if there exists a degree of cooperation across non-overlapping generations (Karnein 2022). Insofar as material levels impact different generations' opportunity to participate in such cooperation it will only be absolute—not relative—levels that are relevant, for the same reasons that applied to the point about intergenerational control.

The final relational reason to care about distributive equality, *Equal Concern*, is based on the assumption that if each member of a cooperative group has a claim to equal benefits, then absent any special justifications, the institution responsible for distributing the benefit in question ought to provide it to everyone equally (Scanlon 2000: 45). In other words, persons' status as equal citizens creates a presumption in favour of distributive equality between them. For example, if the government is required to provide health care to all citizens, it would be unfair if some geographical areas received better care than others. Every citizen, *qua* citizen, has an equal claim to health care services, so inequality based on location (for example the 'post code lottery' in the United Kingdom) is unacceptable. As O'Neill notes this reason for equality "gets its purchase in contexts where there is some distributive agency that falls under an independent obligation to provide some good among the members of a particular population" (2013: 439). When these conditions obtain and the agency in question fails to provide equal benefits, this constitutes an objectionable inequality.

However, there is no intergenerational distributive authority, even among members of the same political community. Among contemporaries, the state is the primary distributive agent. Its responsibilities in most states include health care but also extend to other services such as defence and education. The state at any particular time is not, however, responsible for distributing these goods directly to future citizens since future people do not exist in a reciprocal relationship with current people. The state may choose to implement policies that conserve resources for future generations or have an effect on the ability of the state in the future to distribute goods to future citizens, but the state's role is not to directly distribute them to future people. Therefore future people cannot be said to have an equal claim to benefits from the current state and this reason for equality does not apply intergenerationally.

An intergenerational community of equals?

In the preceding discussion we argued that the most common reasons relational egalitarians care about distributive equality among contemporaries do not travel to the intergenerational case. One might think that this result merely reflects a deeper fact: that relations of equality between non-overlapping generations is not possible. If that is the case, then relational reasons for *anything* between non-overlapping generations simply won't apply. In this section we resist this line of thinking by first considering what an account of relational equality between non-overlapping generations might look like, and then arguing that within such an account there is nonetheless no place for a concern with distributive equality. Doing so is important to this paper's thesis because the nature of relational equality and its requirements in the intergenerational case are likely to be qualitatively different from those in the contemporary case. And so, while the arguments in the preceding section do quite a lot of work in establishing our claim that there are no relational reasons for distributive equality between non-overlapping generations, left as they are they don't *fully* suffice to support that claim. In what follows we show that even though the notion of relational equality between non-overlapping generations is coherent, this doesn't give us any relational reasons to care about distributive equality.

The goal of relational egalitarianism is to achieve a state in which individuals can and do relate to each other as equals. For this to occur, two core requirements are that: (1) no individuals hold unchecked and unaccountable power over others (Anderson 1999: 313; Scheffler 2003: 36-37; Kolodny 2014: 295; Anderson 2017: 44-45), and (2) individuals' attributes and interests are given the consideration that is due to their status as equals (Anderson 2010: 3-6; Anderson 2012: 45; Kolodny 2014: 296; Scheffler 2014: 35-36). These requirements can also be reconstructed from the relational reasons outlined in the previous section. The power requirement obviously captures concerns about domination and control (*Nondomination*), while the due consideration requirement first of all is based on and ensures individuals' status as an equal and a valid source of claims is affirmed (*Status*), but also guarantees their interests and entitlements are taken into account in reasoning about the fairness of procedures (such as seen with *Equality of Opportunity* and *Equal Concern*). If intergenerational relational equality is possible, then what needs to be shown is that these requirements can obtain between individuals from different non-overlapping generations.

We have already noted that previous generations seem to have an inherent power over later generations given actions by the former massively influence the sorts of choices and options that become available to the latter. But because these power asymmetries result from the natural fact of 'time's arrow,' it might be thought they are so entrenched in the intergenerational case that it is just a case of pure domination and so any concern with social equality is moot (Lovett 2001; Katz 2019: 162-165). Indeed, given what is of concern here is not so much the episodic power of some individuals over others exercised through intentional acts, but the systemic background power held by one class of individuals over another class, then the case seems to be one of structural domination (Gädeke 2020; Vrousalis 2021).

Two possible replies here. The first is to say that while each generation that comes into existence is subject to the power and domination of previous generations, because they will eventually have their turn to dominate the subsequent generations then these power inequalities end up cancelling out. But this reply does not work because relational egalitarian's aim of achieving a state where individuals relate to each other as equals surely rules out unequal power not just diachronically but also within different slices of time.⁸ Otherwise it is just a society that is equally unequal at different stages of time. A family is not equal just because the children who get abused will go on to get the opportunity to abuse their own children.

The better reply is to emphasize that because relational egalitarianism does not just reduce to an account of distributive equality aiming to equalize some ‘thing’ or relational ‘resource’ (Kolodny 2014: 300; Bidanure 2016: 238; Moles and Parr 2019: 143-144. Cf. Lippert-Rasmussen 2012; Cordelli 2015; Lippert-Rasmussen 2016; Gheaus 2018), the fact some agents have more power than others will not always rule out relations of equality between them. What counts is who has the power and the ends to which it is put. After all, domination can be transformed into nondomination not only by increasing the power of subordinates or decreasing the power of superiors, but also by modifying the circumstances in which power occurs such that it becomes nonarbitrary (Smith 2013: 227). The aim of relational equality does not demand no power differences, but no unchecked and unaccountable arbitrary power. So while the raw power the present generation holds over future generations can never be completely removed (thanks to the arrow of time), this doesn’t automatically rule out the prospects of intergenerational social equality. What is required are mechanisms to limit this power and to dictate the ends to which it is put. As we will outline shortly, what is important here is institutionally including future persons’ interests into contemporary decision-making processes.

But alongside concerns with nondomination, accounts of social equality are also concerned with the conditions that enable individuals to enjoy the social standing and status that is due to them as equals (this is what makes relational egalitarianism broader than republicanism). The due consideration requirement captures this concern both negatively and positively. The negative claim is that social equality is inconsistent with the attributes (e.g., lineage, race, wealth) of some individuals generally attracting greater consideration than the corresponding attributes in others (Kolodny 2014: 296). More particularly, and as we saw in the earlier discussion of 2) *Status*, the issue is when attributes garner greater consideration in relation to attitudes or a status that ought to be generally applied to society’s members equally.⁹ When individuals from wealthy backgrounds garner more respect than others then social equality cannot obtain—each individual as an equal is entitled to the same degree of respect as anyone else. The positive inverse to this is that social equality requires what Samuel Scheffler calls the Egalitarian Deliberative Constraint, which is that “each member accepts that every other member’s equally important interests should play an equally significant role in influencing decisions made on behalf of the society as a whole” (2014: 35-36).

How does the intergenerational case fare against this due consideration requirement? The first thing to say is that using ‘time of birth’ to give greater consideration to some over others is seemingly no less problematic from the standpoint of social equality than using other arbitrary attributes to this effect. After all, the year one is born is no more relevant to one’s status as a moral equal than one’s postcode, surname, or the colour of their skin. If, due to the fact they currently exist, certain individuals and their interests are given preference and greater consideration (by themselves) than those who will exist in the future (for example, by doing nothing about climate change), would people in the future not be justified in feeling the lack of concern shown towards them and the failure to take their interests into account treated them as social inferiors by failing to recognize them as the equals that they are? This lack of consideration is, at the end of the day, a choice on the part of the present generation. In deliberative procedures about climate change policy, we could do a better job taking into account the interests of those who will come after us—including, for instance, living a minimally decent life or carrying out their lives in the absence of existential threats.¹⁰

Both the power and due consideration requirement then demand that the interests of future persons are incorporated into present-day decision procedures. While relational

egalitarians often emphasize individual attitudes (e.g., Kolodny (2014: 295) talks about individuals having the disposition to not abuse their power and to give individuals' attributes due consideration), for relations of equality to be robust its requirements also need to be institutionalized. This is not just because institutions can influence the attitudes individuals hold (e.g., my belief that it would be wrong to exercise power over you might be caused, at least in part, by the range of social institutions that attempt to prevent this from occurring in the first place), but also because institutions can themselves have a powerful expressive function, communicating to individuals that others—both as individual agents but also collectively as society—are taking their interests into account and thereby confirming their status as an equal (Anderson and Pildes 2000: 1520-1527; Schemmel 2012; Voigt 2018). A full discussion of how to institutionally incorporate and protect future persons' interests lies outside the scope of this paper, but some examples of proposals that have been offered include legislative representation through things like parliamentary committees, ombudsmen, or constitutional provisions (Caney 2016; González-Ricoy 2016; Beckman and Uggla 2016), as well as a guardianship model that aims to protect future people's interests through a range of institutions beyond the political sphere (Smith 2021: 7-8; Smith 2013: 240-244). As Patrick Taylor Smith outlines, a benefit of the latter is that by having future persons' interests accounted for by agents across different domains in society, and then having these agents hold each other accountable (his example is that the ombudsmen for future generations could be checked by an independent judiciary who is in turn limited by constitutional protections for future persons), then this prevents any one group in society having discretion over how the interests of the future are incorporated and protected.

Of course, to some degree any such proposal might still seem problematic from the standpoint of relational equality insofar as it inevitably still leaves it up to the discretion of the powerful—i.e., the present generation as a class—to create and sustain them. Perhaps, but what proposals like these would do is have a strong expressive function by communicating to future persons that individuals in previous generations didn't just exploit the raw power time's arrow provides but did what they could to capture and respect their interests and prevent themselves, as a group, exercising unchecked and arbitrary power over them. Especially for a deontic approach to relational equality, where the concern is with the demands which we can reasonably hold others to account, this will still enable non-overlapping generations to relate to each other as equals. But more fundamentally, if these institutions were substantively implemented and adhered to then by introducing new social norms and role holders to enforce them, they would be removing the 'regulators' or 'periphery agents' that together with the dominators and dominated, make up the triadic relation of structural domination (see Gädeke 2020: 207, 210; Vrousalis 2021: 42-45). While these institutions cannot remove the raw power from time's arrow, they would be chipping away at the social environment that enables and puts one group of individuals in a position to use time's arrow to exercise arbitrary control over another.

The upshot is then that ensuring previous generations do not exert unaccountable and unchecked power over subsequent generations, and for the latter to be given the consideration that due to them as equals, it suffices that the interests of future individuals are meaningfully included in present-day decision-making procedures. Concerns about the degree of distributive equality between them are not relationally relevant. This is because, as we argued in the previous section, distributive inequality does not lead to certain generations having more power or influence over others in the same way it leads to power inequalities among contemporaries. Furthermore, because individuals across non-overlapping generations lack a shared social space and the interactions between them only go one way, distributive equality is not in individuals'

interests—at least for relational egalitarians—because differences in relative material levels do not affect how generations relate to one another. The explanation then for why there are no relational reasons for distributive equality between non-overlapping generations is not that intergenerational relational equality is not possible, but that the demands of relational equality in the intergenerational case differ to the contemporary case.

Grounding concerns

One might object however that even if the power and due consideration requirements are applicable intergenerationally in the manner outlined above, the intergenerational case nonetheless lacks the kind of social relations that are necessary to ground a concern with social equality in the first place (Lippert-Rasmussen 2018: 123-129). After all, Scanlon says the relational objections to inequality he puts forth “do not apply to people who have no interaction with one another” (2018: 9), while O’Neill makes clear his reasons to favour distributive equality only apply between agents who stand in “real social relations” which require “causal interaction” (2008: 134-135). Indeed, in making our own argument that relational reasons for distributive equality do not travel to the intergenerational case, we relied on the fact that individuals from non-overlapping generations lack a shared social space. The basic worry here is that because there cannot be *reciprocal* relations and mutual *interdependencies* between non-overlapping generations (because there is no contemporaneity), then whatever relations or influence that do occur will necessarily be one-way and asymmetrical.

There are two possible replies here. The first is simply to deny that the intergenerational case is asymmetrical in this way and that it lacks reciprocal relations. A common line of argument here is to point to how projects often continue across multiple generations, where they can only be completed by individuals making contributions and sacrifices that respond to the contributions and sacrifices made by those who came earlier, and which anticipate those who will come later (Brandstedt 2015: 48-52; Karnein 2022; Karnein 2023. See also Gosseries 2009; Heath 2013). However, one issue with this move is that while some such projects certainly do exist (the construction and maintenance of grand religious buildings, the progress of a scientific field), it is not clear such projects are common enough to capture a general feature of the relations between non-overlapping generations.¹¹

A second strategy, and the one we will explore, is to accept the point about asymmetrical relations but deny that this means relations of equality are not possible.¹² After all, concerns with social equality apply to different social spheres—e.g., to political and personal relationships—generating different normative upshots in the respective cases. Being an equal with one’s partner is very different to being an equal with one’s co-citizens, and this is surely at least in part because of the differing nature of the social relations in question. The general point being that we shouldn’t be automatically dismissive of the prospects of intergenerational relational equality just because the kind of social relations between non-overlapping generations look very different to the kind of social relations between contemporaries.

Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen considers, before rejecting, this idea of one-way causal influence between two groups being sufficient for social relations to exist between them. To make the argument he gives an example of several Robinson Crusoes who live on different islands and who cannot travel between them, but can send food over on a raft to affect the situation of the others. For Lippert-Rasmussen, “relational egalitarianism does not speak to this situation” (2018: 128). We think Lippert-Rasmussen is right about this in the scenario he

considers, but that this does not show social relations do not obtain between non-overlapping generations because it misses a crucial fact about the influence that previous generations have on those who follow—that it is *ongoing*. Our argument is that in the intergenerational case one group of agents have a knowable and ongoing direct influence on the significant interests of another group of agents, and that this can ground a concern with social equality. By knowable and ongoing direct influence on significant interests, we mean a scenario where the actions of one agent or group of agents are the direct cause for an outcome that significantly affects, and continues to affect, another agent or group of agents, and this is known (or could reasonably be known) by both agents.¹³

To demonstrate why we think actions of this sort are sufficient for social relations to exist and so for concerns of social equality to apply, consider another example, this time from Kolodny (2014: 293):

Suppose that, in a state of nature, several people collaborate in producing some means. Then some of them run off with an unfair share of the fruits of their labors, never to encounter the others again. There is a disparity of means (snared rabbits, say) and a disparity that results from a failure of equal concern for people's independent claims to them (given equal contributions, the rabbits should have been split equally). Nevertheless, because the thieves and their victims do not continue to live together, because the disparity is not, as it were, woven into the fabric of ongoing social relations, there is no structure of hierarchy or subordination between them.

We agree with Kolodny here that, just like in Lippert-Rasmussen's scenario, any wrongness or injustice of the situation cannot be located in concerns about ideal social relations or social equality. But, contrast both these cases to the following:

Suppose that there are two villages along a river, one downstream from the other. Each village is aware of the other, but they do not trade or interact with each other (so they are not reciprocally related). However, both villages are aware that the activities of the upstream village will have a significant and ongoing effect on the downstream village. The upstream village, for example, could divert the river, depriving the downstream village of water for farming. Or they could overfish, leaving none for the downstream village. Or they could dump waste products into the river, resulting in environmental harms for the downstream village.¹⁴

While this scenario is similar to the cases given by Lippert-Rasmussen and Kolodny in that the consequences of one agent's action are significant and direct, and that this ought to be known by both parties, this scenario differs from their cases because the actions of the upstream community continue to echo through time and be felt well after they occur (in a way putting some food on a raft or snatching a few rabbits does not). This feature, we suggest, puts the groups into social relations by establishing an ongoing presence. Despite their being no shared social space as it were between the two groups, the action by the upstream community continuously rears its head, influencing the choices the downstream community can make and the ways they can carry out their lives.

An example will help show why the influence of actions by previous generations on subsequent generations is analogous to the river case. Take for instance climate change. At this point it is undeniable that continuing to do nothing about carbon dioxide levels will directly lead to global warming and rising sea levels. Furthermore, the effects of this action are significant insofar as it is going to lead to things like human displacement, increased health risks, higher instances of natural disasters, and so on, and we and persons in the future can be reasonably taken to know that these are the action's outcomes. But also, and this is what is crucial, because there is no once-off fix to reverse these outcomes, the influence is going to be ongoing and future generations will have to continuously deal with and respond to it. This is not just a scenario where one person or group of persons acts in a way that violates in a singular instance the independent claims of moral equals (although it might also be that), it is a scenario in which one group of persons acts in a way that they know will continuously affect other persons' lives for the worse. To us it is this qualitative difference that explains why, despite the interactions being one-way and asymmetrical, there exists social relations between non-overlapping generations and concerns of social equality can apply. If, as looks likely, the present generation continues to do very little about climate change, we think it coherent to say that such an action treats future persons as social inferiors, and that future persons would be entitled to think this behaviour marks them as such and expresses that we took ourselves to be their social superiors. For the relational egalitarian then the question of course becomes what sort of actions might transform the nature of these relations from that between social superiors and inferiors, to that between equals.

The discussion in this section is preliminary in the sense that we do not take ourselves to be offering a fully developed account of the grounds and demands of intergenerational relational equality. For instance, much more work would be needed to determine how something like the account we have sketched fares against the different reasons relational egalitarians offer for why social equality is valuable and the kind of value it is. Instead, the point has been to show that while the relational egalitarian does not need to worry about distributive equality between non-overlapping generations, this is not because they do not need to worry about the nature of the relations between non-overlapping generations. Insofar as we think concerns of equality—understood broadly—ought to apply intergenerationally (which we both do), then this is something that counts in favour of relational egalitarianism.

Conclusion

The most common reasons relational egalitarians care about distributive equality are based on distributive equality's connection to nondomination, status, equality of opportunity, and equal concern. We began this paper by arguing that none of these relational reasons for distributive equality travel to the intergenerational case. We then argued that this result does not just derive from a more general point that intergenerational relational equality is not possible. First, by arguing that the core requirements of relational equality are in fact applicable in the intergenerational case, but require not distributive equality but institutions that incorporate and protect the interests of future persons. And second, by arguing that despite time's arrow making the relations between non-overlapping generations one-way and asymmetrical, the fact the causal influence of preceding generations' actions are ongoing and continuously affect the significant interests of future persons makes concerns of social equality appropriate and coherent. What our paper has shown is that relational egalitarianism can provide some meaningful answers on what is and is not required for relations of equality to obtain between non-overlapping generations.

While distributive equality might be required to bring about relations of equality between contemporaries, it is not required to bring about relations of equality between generations.

NOTES

¹ The most seminal accounts of relational equality and its potential tension with distributive equality are: Wolff 1998; Anderson 1999; Scheffler 2003.

² Despite not explicitly characterizing his account as such, O'Neill's account is a relational egalitarian one given he takes reasons for valuing distributive equality to "best be understood as elements that together constitute a complex background picture of how people should live together as equals" (2008: 125).

³ See for example the discussion in Finneron-Burns 2023.

⁴ As several writers note (Tomlin 2015; Lippert-Rasmussen 2018; Miklosi 2018; Moles and Parr 2019;), relational and distributive egalitarianism need not be mutually exclusive and hybrid accounts are possible.

⁵ Helpful discussion of these differences can be found in Tomlin 2015: 158-168; Voigt 2020.

⁶ An anonymous reviewer points out that one reason why leaving future generations better off than we are does not create humiliating status differences is that we may feel proud of having achieved a goal (e.g., a better world for our great grandchildren) which prevents us from feeling humiliated in the face of their (expected) better economic position. However, if we were to make future generations *poorer* than we are, this type of 'compensation' will not exist. Our reply is to reiterate that because humiliation requires what we have called 'shared social space' in order to occur, then if we were to leave future people poorer than we are they might rightfully feel resentful or annoyed at us, but it would not make sense to say they are 'humiliated' as humiliation necessarily requires some injury to a person's dignity which in turn requires others to be aware of it. Insofar as goals held by the present generation related to making future generations better off provide a source of pride, this isn't just a direct inverse of the type of humiliation that can result from distributive inequality.

⁷ The relational concern about material inequality's connection to unequal political power could also be cast as a parallel concern about unfair institutions. See Scanlon 2000: 44.

⁸ For this point but applied to age-cohorts, see Bidadanure 2016. See also O'Neill 2008: 149.

⁹ As several writers note some inequalities in esteem might be fine from the standpoint of relational equality (e.g. those that track certain talents), so long as they differ across competing conceptions of the good and are not officially sanctioned (Anderson 2007: 264), or don't result in inequalities in public standing or civic status (Cass 2024: 9).

¹⁰ Although we can reasonably assume that future people will have many of the same interest as we do, we cannot know for certain. For a discussion of how to take future people's interests into account under such conditions of uncertainty, see Finneron-Burns 2024.

¹¹ But for an argument that persons could be generally involved in intergenerational cooperation insofar as they contribute to project of bringing about and maintaining just institutions such that society is a social union of social unions, see McKinnon 2011: 203-209.

¹² For a similar strategy, but based on the difference between relations and relationships, see Sommers 2023.

¹³ This means the social relations that ground a concern with social equality could, at least in principle, obtain across the long term between distant generations. However, because causal links often get blurred over time there will still likely be a limited range of decisions to which future persons' interests ought to be represented.

¹⁴ This case comes from Gauthier 1986: 211-214. For applications in the intergenerational case, see Page 2006: 105; Heath 2013: 39-40.

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