

## *Pragmatist Egalitarianism Revisited: Some Replies to my Critics*

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### Abstract

In this article, I reply to some criticisms of my book, *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, offered by professors Robert Talisse, Susan Dieleman, and Alexander Livingston. Some of the major themes and questions I address include the following: How are conflicts between different egalitarian ideals best understood and addressed? Does the quest for equality have a fundamental locus, or are the different egalitarian variables I identify in the book, conceptually speaking, on an equal footing? What is the relationship between justice and equality? How are feminist egalitarianism and Marxian egalitarianism best slotted into my distinction between “vertical” and “horizontal” egalitarianism? What does liberalism, problematic though it may sometimes be, have to contribute to the egalitarian project?

### Keywords

pragmatism – egalitarianism – justice – Marxism – liberalism – Richard Rorty

I am extremely grateful to Professors Dieleman, Livingston, and Talisse for their generous and thoughtful engagement with *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*. All of them have given me, in their different ways, a great deal to think about.

In a number of instances, my critics appear to agree with each other. Both Dieleman and Talisse, for instance, think that the account I develop needs to say more about how conflicts or tensions among different egalitarian ideals might be resolved—something I admittedly did not attempt in any sustained way. Livingston and Dieleman both take issue with my use of Marx in the book, albeit for different reasons. And both of them agree—again, on slightly different grounds—that my division between vertical and horizontal theories of

equality is not set forth in quite the right way. In other cases, my critics seem to disagree with each other. While Livingston thinks I should throw off the yoke of liberalism once and for all—to admit that “its terms have become so much dead wood obstructing contemporary struggles for equality”—Talisse seems to suggest that my account is perhaps, if I’m reading him correctly, insufficiently liberal. Analogously, while Talisse thinks that I err in failing to assign my “institutional” variable conceptual priority over the “individual” and “cultural” variables, Livingston, in agreement with John Dewey, declares that the “singular focus on the state” endemic among political philosophers in the liberal tradition is a serious failing.

I obviously cannot address everything that has been said by my generous interlocutors. In what follows, then, let me concentrate on each set of comments, one at a time, and try to focus on what strike me as some of the largest, most salient issues.

### Reply to Robert Talisse

I agree with Talisse that justice, foxily construed, is but “one evaluative register within the normative domain” and that injustice, in turn, is merely one “species of wrongness.” I also think that he is correct to highlight the possibility that the achievement of justice in one register might turn out to be inconsistent with the achievement of justice in another register. One would have to be a genuine Platonist Hedgehog indeed to deny that this was conceptually possible. So, on all of this, I am happy to sing in the choir of foxes.

While Talisse is right to say that egalitarians need not and do not condemn inequality as such, I think it’s slightly misleading to say, as he also does, that egalitarians only need object to inequality “with respect to what are identified as *justice-relevant* items”. A central argument in my book, after all, was that valid egalitarian concern may sometimes outstrip the ambit of justice. As I wrote towards the end of the book: “It does not undermine or cheapen a belief in equality to admit that valid egalitarian concern may sometimes arise in places where justice, strictly speaking, is silent.” (Rondel 2018, 187)

Talisse thinks that conflicts among my three variables are not only possible but “highly likely”. As he nicely puts it, “some part of Rondel’s tripartite egalitarian ideal must be butchered.” I completely agree, and nothing I said in the book, so far as I am aware, precludes that possibility. In general, we pragmatists should accept that ideals of all kinds are liable to be butchered. More generally, we pragmatists should be skeptical of theories in which everything is made to hang harmoniously together. Experience will forever be throwing up new

problems; life will forever be foisting upon us difficult, if not tragic, dilemmas; and politics will forever be pressing upon us the need to negotiate conflicting, sometimes intractable demands. Any theory of equality worth its pragmatist salt should be prepared to accept that much.

While Talisse shares what he sees as my skepticism about “*principles* for guaranteeing tidy resolutions” in cases where different egalitarian ideals appear to be in conflict, and while he agrees that a “piecemeal and contextual approach to problem-solving” is our best way to proceed, he also maintains that, when such cases arise, we must find “some non-arbitrary way within the relevant context of prioritizing conflicting values.” In general, I agree. Though it is unclear how the search for a “non-arbitrary way of prioritizing values” (at least as Talisse deploys that phrase) comes to something all that different from the search for principles.

In the real world, problems need to be solved and decisions made. In the real world, unlike the philosophy seminar room, we often cannot just agree to disagree. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with appealing to “principles” in the course of making such decisions. But on the pragmatist view I endorse, “principles” should not be seen as timeless, universal axioms from which to deduce right answers to complicated problems. Nor should they be seen as the product of a special faculty called ‘reason’. Following Richard Rorty, I think that principles are best understood as “abbreviations of past practice”. Invoking “principles” on this view is a way of “summing up the habits of the ancestors we most admire.” (Rorty 1998, xxix) So, how then to deal with conflicts between different egalitarian ideals? Here I think Talisse wants and expects more than I think is in the offing. As I wrote in the conclusion to *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*,

we answer these questions (always tentatively and imperfectly) in a piecemeal way—by responding to the problems thrown up by experience with as much care and cumulative intelligence as we can muster. Normative neatness and apodictic certainty are not in the cards. There are no deep moral algorithms to which we might appeal. To some extent, we have no choice but to work things out as we muddle along.

RONDEL 2018, 188

In the end—and I think this might be the most significant area of disagreement between us—Talisse wants more normative neatness and apodictic certainty than I think we are likely to get.

But does all of this mean that my pluralist egalitarianism is not reconciliatory after all? Talisse appears to think so. He declares that “pluralist views are not recipes for reconciliation. Quite the opposite.” This makes me think that

he and I have something rather different in mind about what “reconciliation” might come to in this particular case. So, let me say a few words about that.

In chapter 5 of *Pragmatist Egalitarianism* I canvass four types of reconciliatory strategy that can be located in the American pragmatist tradition, the full details of which needn’t detain us here. At the end of that discussion, I wrote the following:

While elements of all four reconciliatory strategies can be located in my attempt to reconcile vertical and horizontal egalitarianism, the Rortyan idea of *reconciliation by redescription* is closest to what I have in mind. The reconciliation is achieved by reframing some of the longstanding questions about equality—about its site, scope and shape—to which the “vertical/horizontal” division has been a longstanding response. Just as Rorty urges that artfully deployed redescription can (with luck) help us have fewer spurious philosophical problems on our hands, so can the *reconciliation by redescription* I set forth help us overcome some of the purposeless battles egalitarian theorists continue to wage. More positively, it will provide a capacious new perspective from which to appreciate the element of truth in a variety of different approaches to egalitarianism (liberal, Marxian, feminist, individualist, etc.) without succumbing to the reductionism and eliminativism that... sometimes accompanies them.

RONDEL 2018, 88

To summarize, my reconciliatory attempt involves trying to move us beyond a *specific* impasse that has plagued egalitarian theory, not to move us to a fabled place where all conflicts are resolved and disagreements about equality wither away. Rather than trying to settle the debate between vertical and horizontal egalitarians on its own terms, I suggest that we more or less change the topic—or, as Professor Livingston nicely puts it in his contribution to this symposium, that we “start a new conversation”. Starting a new conversation here doesn’t mean that we will find ourselves suddenly without anything to disagree about. Nor does it mean that difficult decisions about how to prioritize conflicting values (and domains of equality) in particular instances won’t arise. But it does mean, if I am right, that the question at the heart of the divide between vertical and horizontal egalitarianism (namely: What is the *fundamentally* important egalitarian ideal?) will come to look quaint and beside the point. If we accept that struggles for equality in the real world invariably involve the Institutional, the Individual, and the Cultural variables, and the complex ways in which these variables work together and mutually influence one another (something I tried to show in my empirically-informed discussion of racial inequality in

the United States) my claim was that the question about *fundamentality* which has been at the nucleus of egalitarian theory for so long can safely recede into the background.

It is true that questions about “essences” and “fundamentality” are, as I put it in the book, “the very stock and trade of professional philosophers.”

Large swaths of philosophical writing... are devoted almost exclusively to them. It is difficult to imagine what moral and political philosophy would be *about* if philosophers refrained from posing these kinds of questions: about the goods prized intrinsically, as ends, as opposed to those prized merely instrumentally; about hierarchies of value; about whether some ideal was fundamental and another derivative; about whether some principle or normative commitment could be reduced to another one.

RONDEL 2018, 173

Talisse, it seems, wants to continue in this general direction. For him, the question of egalitarian fundamentality comes charging back into view when he declares that “pragmatist egalitarians must embrace the priority of the institutional variable.” I obviously agree that what Rawls calls a “just basic structure” is a vitally important element in the quest for an egalitarian society, and I agree too that the institutional variable has always been at the center of political-philosophical reflection on equality and inequality. But is there really no way to abstain from declaring on the question of fundamentality in discussions of equality? No way to change the terms of the conversation in such a way that this imperative isn’t forced upon us? Are quintessentially philosophical questions like these really natural and unavoidable? Those of us who take metaphilosophical inspiration from William James and Richard Rorty have their doubts. But more to the point, if the main argument of *Pragmatist Egalitarianism* is on the mark, making the question of fundamentality central in discussions about equality and inequality is not a particularly helpful way to proceed.

### Reply to Susan Dieleman

Professor Dieleman worries that I mischaracterize the debate between vertical and horizontal egalitarianism as a debate about which egalitarian ideal should have “priority” in theorizing equality and inequality. Rather than a debate merely about which egalitarian ideal to foreground, she claims that there are good reasons to think that the two ideals may be in tension with one another. If that is so, moreover, then the approach I develop needs to do more than simply

“recognize” that inequality has multiple sites and multiple remedies. Beyond that, it “also needs to provide methods for navigating this tension when it arises.” I readily grant, as I did in my reply to Professor Talisse, that different egalitarian ideals may sometimes come into conflict with each other—both in theory and in practice. But as a devotee of Rortyan pragmatism, I confess that the word “method” makes me nervous.

Dieleman raises an important point when she claims that the lists of characteristics I use to describe vertical and horizontal egalitarianism, following a stylistic technique of William James from his *Pragmatism* lectures, have a problematically gendered history. I see that more clearly now. But I’m less clear about how Dieleman’s feminist perspective on the purported division between vertical and horizontal egalitarianism differs all that much from what I ultimately conclude. After all, I am explicit in the book that the “vertical/horizontal division is too crude to capture all the ways in which we are disposed to care about equality.” (Rondel 2018, 75) Dieleman says that, “feminist accounts of equality are uniquely and justifiably suspicious of this division and of the hierarchical relationship between its two sides.” But so, indeed, is the view ultimately set forth in my book. My goal was never to defend or endorse the division, after all. Quite the contrary. The main ambition of *Pragmatist Egalitarianism* was to develop a conception of equality that gets us beyond it. As I noted in the book’s first chapter:

I am not ultimately interested in defending the usefulness of the vertical/horizontal distinction. On the contrary, I shall be arguing ... for a pluralistic and...more analytically precise way of making sense of different egalitarian ideals and theories. My argument for the time being is only that the division between “vertical” and “horizontal” egalitarianism enjoys some bit of descriptive truth, that it accurately indexes, even if only loosely and partially, the prevailing winds among philosophers and political theorists who self-identify as egalitarians. I do not claim that this way of drawing the distinction is the only or even necessarily the best one. Still, I expect that what is offered will ring true for readers.

RONDEL 2018, 24

I am happy to recognize, on Dieleman’s urging, the distinctively feminist pedigree of horizontal conceptions of equality. And while I relied on Marxism as an illustrative exemplar (a decision that probably had more to do with idiosyncratic reading habits than any principled or philosophical stance), I think I was clear in the book that feminist egalitarianism (or most of it, at any rate) rightly belongs in this camp too.

I think Dieleman is right to make note of a certain asymmetry between liberal and feminist egalitarianisms. Unlike liberal egalitarianism, which maintains (more or less) that a just basic structure is sufficient, over time, to deliver the equality we prize, feminist egalitarianism is not *merely* a mirrored inversion of that view. Beyond the emphasis on what Iris Young calls “cultural revolution”, feminist egalitarianism tends to feature another central claim: namely, as Dieleman puts it, that a society that meets the demands of liberal justice “but only these demands...*can't help but* exhibit...further sorts of [social and cultural] inequalities, because they are ‘baked into’ the structure of liberalism itself.”

I'm not sure if Dieleman thinks that there is anything worth saving in liberalism (Professor Livingston seems to me more resolute on this point, and what I shall say here is germane to his commentary as well). But here are two propositions that I believe can be maintained simultaneously:

1. Liberalism, broadly considered, has a racist, sexist, colonialist, and imperialist history. Elements of that history have a tendency to animate liberal theory itself. So that, to quote Charles Mills's assessment of John Rawls, “he condemns racism while devising a theory of justice which launders European colonialism and imperialism, structurally excludes the correction of historic racial injustices, and is basically oriented by the perspectives and priorities of the white settler population (Native Americans make no appearance in the 2000 pages of Rawls's five books.)” (Mills 2017)
2. Liberal rights and principles about the legitimate use of state coercion are necessary ingredients in the quest for equality.<sup>1</sup>

I want to affirm both of these propositions. (Some feminists clearly do too; lest the phrase “liberal feminism” be an oxymoron.) To put the point more bluntly, either liberal rights and principles about the limits and duties of government form part of the quest for political equality or they do not. I believe they do. More generally, I think Richard Rorty is right when he says that, “the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at self-creation to the best of his or her abilities, and...that goal requires, besides peace and wealth, the standard ‘bourgeois freedoms.’” (Rorty 1989, 84) (It is worth noting parenthetically that many real-world struggles for equality, from female suffrage to civil rights for African Americans, have similarly sought equal citizenship in

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<sup>1</sup> To be clear, I am talking about liberalism proper here, not what many of us call ‘neoliberalism’. I think Elizabeth Anderson is exactly right when she claims that neoliberalism has, her word, “*twisted*” liberalism.

the eyes of the state. Didn't such movements struggle for, among other things, precisely what Marx scorned as bourgeois, liberal freedom?)

I am not claiming that liberal egalitarianism is without fault or comprehensive in its approach to equality. Far from it. Liberalism is an old, big, multifarious, and versatile tradition. It comes in many flavors and, on the whole, I think it has the capacity to improve itself. But even so, liberal egalitarianism has virtually no analysis and critique of power. It tends to operate, as Dewey memorably argued, with impoverished conceptions of individuality and freedom. Liberal theory also tends to be oblivious to history and social science, and is far too often apologetic for capitalism. As I argue in the book, liberals also fail to take seriously the egalitarian import of culture and social meaning. But one can grant all of this and still maintain, as I do, that liberalism captures a portion of the truth about egalitarianism. This is compatible with simultaneously recognizing that it gets a whole lot disastrously wrong.

### Reply to Alexander Livingston

Professor Livingston's comments on *Pragmatist Egalitarianism* are the most politically oriented of the bunch. He appears less concerned with some of the fussy philosophical intricacies of the book than he is with the broader vision of egalitarian politics and struggle that might lie in their wake. Most of Livingston's remarks concern "the broader political implications" of the view I develop. I want to discuss that, but let me correct one fussy infelicity first. Livingston attributes to me the view that philosophers should stop talking about justice and start talking about equality instead. As I remarked in my reply to Professor Talisse, I am not recommending that egalitarians stop talking about justice altogether. Rather, my argument is that we should recognize that there is more to the quest for equality than what is contained within the quest for justice. Or, as I put it in the book, we can "agree with George Washington...in words now proudly engraved above the New York State Supreme courthouse, that 'The true administration of justice is the firmest pillar of good government' while also recognizing that there is much more to equality than justice and good government." (Rondel 2018, 53) Nevertheless, I'm not unhappy with what Livingston isolates as the book's central "punch-line"—in his words: "if you care about equality, then you shouldn't get *so hung up* about justice." (my emphasis)

While I'm flattered that he was able to spot such grand political implications in *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*, I think that my ambitions in the book were much humbler than Livingston sometimes seems to assume. Rather than trying to



spell out the political consequences of pragmatism, I wanted to show—much more meekly—how pragmatism, properly deployed, can help resolve a number of long-standing controversies in which theorists of egalitarianism continue to be enmired. One of the things I try to do in the book, as Livingston rightly notes, was to profess “philosophical irony while touting political high hopes”. But I’m not sure whether any views about something grandiose like “the political consequence of pragmatism” can be gleaned from that.

I think Livingston is right to spot a certain wobbliness on my part between, on the one hand, what he nicely calls the “deflationary” or “Rortyan” mode that animates much of how the book proceeds, and, on the other hand, the attempt to articulate and affirm a “viable egalitarianism”. I see more clearly now that this combination of negative (Rortyan) and positive (Deweyan) commitments sometimes tug in different directions, and sometimes made me perform various contortions.

I’m given pause by Livingston’s assertion that the terms of comparison between vertical and horizontal egalitarianism themselves “presume a piece of liberal ideology that the socialist tradition...invites us to reject.” He elaborates,

Once we see that the very distinction between vertical and horizontal organizing Rondel’s analysis is itself a piece of liberal ideology beholden to a particular social formation rather than a neutral description, the idea that socialism requires some liberal supplement in order to grasp ‘the complex multidimensional issue’ of equality becomes far from self-evident.

To re-iterate what I said in my reply to Professor Dieleman, I ultimately want to reject those terms of comparison too. I have no fidelity to them as such. But, as I also noted, I think these categories enjoy some bit of “descriptive truth” which is to say that they approximate, to some decent degree of accuracy, the “prevailing winds among philosophers and political theorists who self-identify as egalitarians.” (Rondel 2018, 24) In short, I focus on the vertical/horizontal distinction not because I think this the optimal way to “organize my analysis” but simply because I think this describes how things are, for the most part, in contemporary egalitarian theory. Livingston clearly laments how things are in contemporary egalitarian theory. I do too. But lamenting how things are in contemporary egalitarian theory is not the same as describing how things are in contemporary egalitarian theory.

Livingston confesses that he is not always able to recognize what he calls “Rondel’s Marx.” I err, he thinks, in depicting Marxism as a “funhouse mirror reflection of the liberal hypostatization of the state.” Marx is a notoriously

difficult thinker, and I'm happy to accept Livingston's argument according to which, for Marx, the "starting point" for any serious discussion of freedom and equality must be "the functional interdependence and ideological division of state and society within a capitalist social formation." Fair enough. I think Livingston and I differ perhaps in that I want to foreground the youthful, more humanistic Marx—the Marx who celebrates what he calls "the true community of men" and who chastises the impotence of "egoistic man" to get beyond "the narrow horizon of bourgeois right". So, while I agree with what Livingston says about Marxism, I think it is also right to say that, for Marx—especially the young Marx of *On the Jewish Question*—the real site of equality is on the ground, in civil society, between people in the everyday, social, and productive contexts of their lives. I think G.A. Cohen gets it exactly right on Marx's behalf when he writes, in a passage I cite in the book:

The ideal liberal society is not the same as the ideal socialist society. In the ideal socialist society, equal respect and concern are not projected out of society and restricted to the ambit of an alien superstructural power, the state. If the right principles are, as Marx thought, the ones that are right for real, everyday, material life, and if they are practiced in everyday life, as the socialist ideal utopianly envisages that they will be, then the state can wither away.

COHEN 2008, 1

Putting the point in another way: If we were to force Marx, anachronistically, to take sides in the debate between vertical and horizontal egalitarianism—if we forced him to answer the question, "Insofar as equality is a valuable ideal, in what does its value *fundamentally* consist?"—I remain confident that he would side with those on the so-called "horizontal" wing of the dispute.

In the end, Livingston urges me to "take the plunge" and affirm a "radical democratic politics premised on the action-oriented claim that democratic ends call for democratic means." That sounds pretty good to me. Like Livingston, I am excited by the return of socialism on the national stage for the first time in over a generation. But like Dewey himself (who was clearly both a socialist of a sort and a liberal of a sort) I don't think saying 'yes' to radical Livingstonian democratic socialism automatically implies a wholesale rejection of liberalism. A radical democratic politics of the sort Livingston commends is not incompatible with the recognition that, as Michael Walzer puts it, "no significant move toward greater equality has ever been made without state action" (Walzer 2004, 83) and that, for better for worse, we find ourselves in what Rawls memorably called "the circumstances of justice".

By way of a final thought: I was a little bit surprised (and chuffed, frankly) that none of my critics seemed to take any serious issue with my readings of Dewey, James, and Rorty that together make up the majority of the book. If that is indeed the case, then, all things considered, I think I am doing alright.

Let me finish by once again expressing my thanks to Professors Dieleman, Livingston, and Talisse. Special thanks are also due to Professor Colin Koopman, who helped organize the “Author-Meets-Critics” panel at the 2019 American Philosophical Association Meeting from which this symposium originally derived. I have labored long and hard on *Pragmatist Egalitarianism*. It makes me very happy that this trio of friends and philosophers were willing to take the book seriously, to engage with it in good faith, and to help me think through how the ideal of a society of equals is best understood and struggled for.

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