**Relational Egalitarianism and Emergent Social Inequalities**

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**Abstract:** This paper identifies a challenge for liberal relational egalitarians­—namely, how to respond to the prospect of emergent inequalities of power, status, and influence arising unintentionally through the free exercise of fundamental individual liberties over time. I argue that these emergent social inequalities can be produced through patterns of nonmalicious choices, that they can in fact impede the full realization of relational equality, and that it is possible they cannot be eliminated entirely without abandoning fundamental liberal commitments to leave individuals substantial discretion in their personal lives. In such cases, I argue that liberal egalitarians should accept *fair relational equality*—a demanding but nevertheless imperfect form of relational equality.

**Keywords:** equality, relational equality, social relations, association

**1. Introduction**

A fully realized liberal relational egalitarian society would, naturally enough, fulfill both liberal and relational egalitarian commitments.[[1]](#footnote-1) Inasmuch as it is a liberal society, its members would retain important liberties to plan and manage their own lives, as they pursue their own conceptions of the good. Inasmuch as it realizes relational equality, its members would relate nonhierarchically. The extent to which these commitments can be realized in tandem is rarely questioned, but in what follows, I explore reasons to think they can come into tension. I argue that the liberal commitment to leave individuals significant discretion in their informal social choices could impede the *full* realization of relational equality, even in an ideal society. Quotidian, nonmalicious choices people make in informal social interaction can produce disparities of power, status, and influence that threaten relational equality. Societies committed to achieving relational equality would need to introduce responsive institutional measures to address these emergent social inequalities, but it is not obvious that liberal institutional designs can rectify or fully compensate for inequalities created by informal social choices. In short, there is a worry about how well we can realize relational equality while leaving people free to manage their own lives and pursue their own conceptions of the good.

In this paper, I explain the worry and what liberal relational egalitarians can and cannot do in response. Most liberal relational egalitarians have not squarely faced this issue, partly due to their non-ideal, ameliorative focus.[[2]](#footnote-2) The conflict is clearest when considering long-range demands of the relational egalitarian ideal, assuming that many of the gravest injustices of our societies have been eliminated.[[3]](#footnote-3) Consider two examples.

First, under the right conditions, patterns of free associative choices can produce stratified social networks without any intentional discrimination or explicitly elitist preferences. Suppose the society in question is large enough to have a division of labor and specialized forms of education,[[4]](#footnote-4) and that people tend to choose long-term romantic partners partly on the basis of proximity and regular interaction. It would not be surprising, under such circumstances, if those trained for prestigious offices or high-skill positions were more likely to intermarry, just in virtue of their opportunities for social interaction with classmates and colleagues. However innocently it arises, occupational or educational homogamy can impede relational equality: the stratification of informal social networks can result in worrisome inequalities of power, opportunity, and influence.

Second, patterns in how individuals esteem each other can also generate emergent inequalities. One might hope that in a diverse society, individuals will value such a variety of traits and skills that everyone will be esteemed for something and no general social ranking will be legible.[[5]](#footnote-5) When standards of value converge, though, expressions of esteem can contribute to the creation of informal status hierarchies. This can happen as individuals exercise their freedom of speech to articulate what they find admirable, to praise others for their achievements. The emergence and persistence of informal status hierarchies may simply run counter to the ambitions of the egalitarian society itself. Differentials in esteem can also translate into differentials in influence, to the extent that those who are admired are given greater credibility. Even if such patterns of esteem do not produce oppressive stigma or marginalization, they can stand in the way of the full realization of relational equality. In both of these examples, the relevant inequalities can be created without coordination or intention, so long as individuals are free to express themselves, form their own conception of what is valuable, and choose their own associates. In cases like these, the liberal ideal in which individuals can pursue their own plans of life and express their own conceptions of the good can unintentionally undermine relational equality.

Whether emergent social inequalities pose a real problem depends on the extent to which they impede relating as equals and how well societies can respond. I argue that in some circumstances, liberal relational egalitarians should accept the possibility of an imperfectly achieved but justifiable form of relational equality—what I call *fair relational equality*. What imperfections remain in egalitarian social relations would depend on many social contingencies, but egalitarians ought to acknowledge the possibility that differentials of power and status that genuinely impede equality may be ineradicable in liberal societies. In order to explain this position, I first need to explain how I understand relational egalitarianism and the relevant liberal commitment. In section 2, I will explain the idea of emergent social inequalities and why they pose a worry that for a deliberative-practice conception of relational egalitarianism. In section 3, I sketch the rudiments of fair relational equality.

*Relational Egalitarianism*

Most broadly, relational egalitarianism holds that equality is first and foremost concerned with the quality of social relations (as opposed to being primarily concerned with the distribution of some good).[[6]](#footnote-6) In much of the literature, the egalitarian relationship is defined purely negatively—as the absence of domination, stigma, marginalization, and other forms of oppression—but it is conceivable and desirable that the relationship could be described in positive terms. Elizabeth Anderson described the positive aim of relational egalitarianism as building a “social order” or “democratic community” of “open discussion among equals” (1999, 313), but the requirements of that positive goal remained underspecified in the earliest formulations. Certainly relational equality requires political institutions that eliminate formal hierarchies of power and status, but given that relational equality is cast in opposition to oppression, arguably it also requires attention to social norms and personal relations. A full positive conception would explain what unifies objections to relational inequalities and what a commitment to relational egalitarianism demands.

Samuel Scheffler (2015) provides a starting point for a positive conception of what it means to relate as equals. On his view, relating as equals is a practice of discussion and decision-making that people can engage in, a way of approaching matters of collective significance. He initially characterizes what he calls the “egalitarian deliberative constraint” (hereafter ‘EDC’) as follows:

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 (Scheffler 2015, 25).

Which decisions count as matters of collective significance, and how they should be decided, depend on the nature of the relationship—for example, whether it is a relationship between romantic partners or citizens. This is a *deliberative* constraint, and not just a constraint on the decisions themselves, for two reasons. First, the parties articulate, learn, and shape each other’s interests and their own through such discussion. Second, there is no obviously, singularly correct method of resolving the second-order problem of how to weigh interests and make joint decisions. While procedures like flipping a coin or voting may sometimes be appropriate, there are no simple formulas that can replace ongoing shared deliberation.

The central idea, then, is that relational equality can be understood in terms of a complex practice of deliberation and decision-making—successfully engaging in the practice shows that the parties regard each other as equals and constitutes treating each other as equals. In a political context, this requires that the members of society collaboratively shape important shared institutions and practices. They will at least collectively decide how to structure the social practices that enable their cooperation—the government, the market, institutions of civil society, and some informal social practices that facilitate interaction.[[7]](#footnote-7) Members of society fully relate as equals when they make a particular set of decisions (i.e., about their government and other fundamental sociopolitical institutions) in this fashion. Some decisions require favoring one person’s interests over another’s, so the parties aspire to satisfy this constraint diachronically, over the course of the relationship. In one sense, this deliberative conception just begins to develop what it would mean to realize a thoroughly democratic, egalitarian community.

Scheffler’s starting point is promising but requires interpretation and expansion to provide a comprehensive positive ideal. I will make a few interpretive suggestions here, though a full unpacking is a separate project.[[8]](#footnote-8)

First, this conception of relational equality could be understood as both a hypothetical standard and a demand for actual deliberation. Both real deliberative practice and a hypothetical deliberative standard are needed. The fact that some decisions that citizens should make together (e.g., whether to maintain certain ongoing social practices or political institutions) are not actively deliberated upon at every moment doesn’t pose a problem for the equality of the relationship, if the preservation of those practices meets a hypothetical deliberative standard. In other cases, actual deliberation and decision-making will be necessary. Some interests are developed and refined through the deliberative process, so learning the parties’ interests requires discussion. Even if that weren’t the case, ceding all actual decision-making to a benevolent caretaker would create objectionable power differentials. Finally, the EDC underdetermines what should be chosen in some circumstances.

Second, in a political context the EDC should be interpreted as requiring both formal and informal deliberation. Formal deliberation could happen through representative bodies, in town-hall settings, or other explicitly political institutions. Even though Scheffler is right that citizens can relate as equals even if they have not engaged in face-to-face deliberation with every other citizen (as will be the case in any sufficiently large polity), deliberation can be construed as taking place informally, in a variety of public, semi-public, and private spaces.[[9]](#footnote-9) Prior to taking a vote, citizens learn about and shape each other’s interests through diverse deliberative fora—discussing matters of collective significance with friends, neighbors, voluntary associations, and community organizations. Because those conversations are important for joint decision-making in a society of equals, the shape of informal social networks can influence the decisions that are ultimately made. The deliberation that enables decision-making is not an isolated activity, then, but rather is diffused throughout the social life of the egalitarian society. In a political context, the deliberative practice needs to be understood as a system of interdependent institutions and activities that help aggregate the input of the society’s many members.

Third, since this constraint leaves room for the parties to decide exactly how to balance their interests, the society of equals is multiply realizable. The ideal relational-egalitarian society could vary to some degree depending on the decisions of its members. Whatever shape it takes, the relational-egalitarian society must be such that citizens are in a position to successfully engage in this deliberative practice. That arguably requires robustly democratic governing institutions, mechanisms for compressing material inequality (to reduce the risk of dependency and domination), and some means of preventing at least the grossest forms of discrimination, stigma, and social exclusion. While there is room for the parties to share more of their lives together, to put more up for collective decision-making, the decisions that fall “within the context of the relationship” must at least concern the structural preconditions for egalitarian deliberation, which will include the basic social and political institutions of society.

Finally, this conception of relational equality does not require absolute equality of power, status, and influence—there might be good reasons, for instance, for those with greater interests or expertise to have greater influence on some matters. Inequalities of power, status, and influence can undermine egalitarian deliberation, though, and unjustified hierarchies that influence the deliberative practice would contravene the basic spirit of the commitment.[[10]](#footnote-10) Citizens might object to inequalities of power, status, and influence whenever they impede that deliberation or when the differentials could not be justified by the EDC. This does not mean that such inequalities are objectionable only because they impede deliberative practice. To be objectionable at all already requires that there are good reasons to object, connected to the interests of the participants.[[11]](#footnote-11) Full relational equality would be achieved when the parties successfully meet the demands of the deliberative constraint for all decisions that fall within the context of their relationship.

This conception of relational equality is more demanding than others that have been offered. Some argue that relational equality is compatible with substantial, unjustified differentials of power, status, and influence. Daniel Viehoff, for instance, describes an egalitarian relationship as one in which the parties refrain from making use of power differentials (2014, 353). Anderson writes that “democratic equality regards two people as equal when each accepts the obligation to justify their actions by principles acceptable to the other, and in which they take mutual consultation, reciprocation, and recognition for granted” (1999, 313). Some interpret that to mean that the parties relate as equals when they adopt the appropriate respectful intentions toward each other, which Anderson’s discussion of justice as an agential virtue might seem to support (2012b, 2).

In contrast, this conception of relational equality maintains that differences in capacities can impede relational equality, even if the parties have the right dispositions or attitudes. Substantial differentials of power can affect deliberation and joint decision-making, even if all parties have good intentions. Inequalities of status and influence in private spheres could infect how we relate, how much credence we give each other, and how we make collective decisions together, in spite of efforts to bracket them.[[12]](#footnote-12) At least in some cases, relational equality is simply incompatible with substantial differentials of power, influence, and status. Even if the parties regard each other as equals, they can fail to treat one another as equals if these differentials are unaddressed. Full relational equality requires not just that individuals genuinely try to interact as equals; it requires them to arrange social power and influence in ways that facilitate egalitarian relations. The deliberative-practice conception offers a standard for evaluating which differentials have to be eliminated for parties to fully relate as equals.

*Liberalism and Fundamental Individual Liberties*

In order to capture as broad a subset of liberals as possible, I offer a minimal stipulative definition of liberalism. Liberals hold that society can be arranged such that the demands of justice are not “fully directive”[[13]](#footnote-13)— they do not determine every individual choice. Some set of individual liberties are of fundamental moral importance—at least including freedom of thought, conscience, and speech, and freedom of association—and how individuals exercise those liberties is left to their discretion, within certain bounds. Importantly, this is both a restriction on state coercion and a claim about what is justly demanded of individuals. While liberals disagree about when and to what degree those liberties may be permissibly limited, they generally agree that justice can be achieved while leaving individuals broad latitude to pursue their own conception of the good. They hold that liberalism will not require pervasive (frequent or especially intrusive) demands on individuals’ associative choices, the articulation of their beliefs, or decisions to pursue one morally unobjectionable project over another. That society preserves this room for individual autonomy is a central component of the liberal ideal.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**2. Emergent Social Inequalities**

Without careful attention, the kinds of free, informal social choices protected by such a liberal commitment can cumulatively impede full relational equality. Even a society full of individuals guided by an egalitarian ethos (who are well-intentioned, solidaristic, and caring) may yet still fail to achieve relational equality, due to *emergent social inequalities*—disparities in power, status, and influence that arise not from the wrongful or vicious acts of any individuals but from patterns of socialization that disadvantage some.[[15]](#footnote-15) These disparities would make it difficult for people to continue to successfully engage in egalitarian deliberation, or they may straightforwardly constitute kinds of relationships at odds with the spirit of the ideal. Because these disparities can emerge from patterns of nonmalicious choices, they would escape notice if we focused only on treating others with respect. In some cases, a relational-egalitarian society could predict and prevent emergent social inequalities, or construct institutional mechanisms to compensate for emergent social inequalities. In others, it is not clear how well liberal relational egalitarians can address emergent social inequalities without curtailing the free exercise of fundamental individual liberties.

Informal associative choices can play an important role in generating social inequalities. I described above how marital or romantic decisions, in combination with other features of society, could give rise to inequalities in power and influence. Personal choices about whom to befriend, where to live, and where to spend one’s off-hours can similarly generate emergent social inequalities. As people go about their lives making personal choices for a variety of reasons, these informal associative norms and practices can produce a world in which some groups reliably have inferior access to certain goods over the course of their lives. Some individuals may, as a result of this process, wind up with far more powerful connections and on that basis have the ability to do considerably more than others. It may lead to disparities in influence: some individuals may wind up with larger social networks that amplify their voice and interests. It may lead to disparities in status: most straightforwardly, having larger or more prestigious social networks can confer higher status on individuals.

Although social stratification in our world (e.g., on lines of race or class) often reflects and exacerbates deep legacies of injustice, these kinds of disparities could emerge even starting from ideally just circumstances. If the just society permits some material inequality or occupational division of labor,[[16]](#footnote-16) and levels of income and occupation affect residential or lifestyle choices, then informal social networks can cluster along those lines, just in virtue of the fact that social networks are often shaped by proximity and the contingencies of regular interaction. Bonding on the basis of shared educational backgrounds or interests could similarly have the unintended effect of clustering advantages by group or household, providing richer and more valuable social networks to the already advantaged. Even if some material inequality or administrative positions of power were justified in themselves, that would not justify the attendant social advantages that some would get by having social networks composed of such people. Those who have consistently poorer access to influential networks of friends and associates will have an inferior ability to make their voices heard and interests understood, as well as less power and opportunity.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Similar considerations apply to the cumulative effects of how individuals evaluate and esteem each other. As individuals form and express personal evaluations of others, they could produce a number of unintended effects: elevating a few select individuals to markedly superior positions, stigmatizing others who fail to possess some qualities held in high regard, or systematically favoring some groups on the basis of unconscious bias. Esteem recognition is hard to cabin, and it seems plausible that those who are admired for one reason could be given undue influence in unrelated areas.[[18]](#footnote-18) Personal evaluations and expressions of esteem that are permissible on their own can produce a social world in which some groups reliably have much greater power or influence than others.

*Why Such Inequalities Matter*

The disparities that emerge through these processes may pale next to the forms of domination, stigma, and marginalization that have typically commanded the attention of relational egalitarians, but they could still be relevant to whether the relational egalitarian ideal is *fully* realized. The shape of informal social networks and the activity that takes place in intimate and personal relationships can have an effect on what resources people have, their relative position in society, and how well their interests are heard. Emergent social inequalities matter from a relational-egalitarian standpoint when they affect how individuals interact and deliberate, when the resultant shape of social networks prevents successful societal deliberation, or when the differentials reflect social choices that could not be justified by the EDC.

Differentials in power, status, or influence could affect how the parties interact and make decisions together. Power differentials can mean that the parties have different options if collective decision-making fails. Those differentials can influence their interests and how likely they are to express them—those who are more vulnerable may be less apt to press their claims, for instance. Differentials of status and influence can likewise affect how well each other’s interests are understood and how the deliberative agenda is structured. Disproportionate attention to the admired and successful can distort the relative importance of their interests or make it comparatively easier to understand their perspectives. While a diachronic satisfaction of the EDC may permit the parties to favor one person’s interests in one decision and the other person’s in another, differentials in power, status, or influence that generally undermine their ability to deliberate together on an equal footing cannot be justified in a similar manner.

This change in how the parties interact might be partly explained by a shift in dispositions—those who have greater power may be less motivated to try to realize the egalitarian deliberative constraint, or informal social hierarchies might encourage desires to obtain superior standing.[[19]](#footnote-19) The problem is not simply a matter of dispositions, though. Power differentials can also make it harder to understand the interests of the other—as their needs diverge, it will become harder to empathize and weigh each other’s interests. Even people who remain wholly committed to the deliberative ideal may struggle to realize it when the social world is characterized by these inequalities.

The resultant shape of informal social networks could make some forms of societal deliberation harder. Realistically, at the societal level whether citizens relate as equals is not best judged by considering how any two individuals would interact in passing, but how decisions in that society are made, and that will involve a nested series of conversations. Making decisions together requires more than a space for formal political processes (e.g., legislative chamber or town hall), since a significant aspect of that decision-making will happen informally, in private spaces with friends, acquaintances, and neighbors. If some groups persistently have access to greater resources or their voices have a wider reach through chains of informal influence, that could conceivably affect how well the society is able to engage in the practice of deliberation and decision-making.

Finally, some emergent social inequalities are objectionable because they reflect a social choice that cannot be justified as satisfying the EDC, even if they do not materially affect deliberation. Arbitrary standards of esteem can be invidious, and they can imply disrespect and suggest a societal judgment when people converge on those standards. Of course, many arbitrary standards of esteem are incompatible with treating and regarding others as equals, regardless of downstream emergent consequences. Paradigmatically objectionable standards of esteem—discriminating on the basis of race or sex—are flatly incompatible with giving equally important interests equally significant influence, since those standards systematically downgrade the equally important interests of others. That relational egalitarians can object to emergent social inequalities because they impede deliberation does not mean that impediments to deliberation are all that matter.[[20]](#footnote-20)

If emergent social inequalities are small, they may not affect the course of egalitarian deliberation. In many cases, bad social fortune as an individual is compatible with continued participation in collective social deliberation as an equal. Emergent social inequalities are most obviously a worry where patterns of social interaction consistently disadvantage groups of people. In the cases described at the outset, the inegalitarian cumulative effects are deep and persistent. In the society stratified by educational and occupational homogamy, people of different educational attainment will spend much of their lives with very different groups, and those with the more powerful or influential social networks will generally have greater informal social resources at their disposal. In the society that has converged on an informal status hierarchy, people without the universally admired traits can expect differential treatment. This is not an indicator that only group-based disadvantage matters, but that significant emergent social inequalities are easiest to identify as worrisome when they have a broad impact on deliberation.

The social choices that produce emergent social inequalities do not need to be appropriate matters of political debate or collective decision-making themselves, to be relevant to whether citizens stand as equals. There is little reason to think that standing as equals requires that we make all informal social choices together—that, for instance, we deliberate together about whom you will befriend or where you will live. Even if informal social choices are not apt subjects of collective decision-making, they could be relevant to whether people have the ability to collectively deliberate in the right fashion, so an appropriate informal social environment could be a prerequisite for relational equality.

However, informal social life could enter into collective deliberation through deliberation of informal social norms, rather than collective deliberation of individuals’ choices. The norms of informal association can contribute to emergent inequalities. In the cases described at the outset, inegalitarian cumulative effects can be seen as at least partly caused by the structure of informal social life (enabled by its norms and practices). Societal expectations of appropriate interaction with neighbors, colleagues, congregants, partners in voluntary associations, and strangers shape individuals’ social opportunity sets and the significance of certain kinds of social connections. These societal expectations make some interactions more or less likely. Likewise, the norms governing behavior within relations are important to shaping the opportunities and resources people have. They define what it means to be a friend, the kinds of activities and experiences that friends share, the layers of private details it is appropriate to disclose to friends, and what constitutes reasonable partiality.

If relational egalitarians are committed to making decisions about shared institutions and practices in line with the EDC, and the norms and practices of informal social life play an important role in organizing the interaction of citizens, then they have a responsibility to create and maintain informal social practices that meet the demands of the EDC. So the associative norms and practices of a society, and more generally its informal social structure, are matters for collective, egalitarian deliberation.[[21]](#footnote-21) If those practices regularly generate emergent social inequalities, there is a strong case for concluding that those who are disadvantaged do not stand as equals with others.

*What Relational Equality Demands of Individuals*

Committed relational egalitarians who encounter emergent social inequalities will take steps to mitigate them. The basic social and political institutions can take on additional compensatory or responsive measures to prevent emergent social inequalities or blunt their effects. (The relational-egalitarian literature has not addressed these institutional requirements because emergent social inequalities have not been discussed in depth.) The familiar framework of institutional relational-egalitarian requirements—robust democratic structures, economic redistribution, and antidiscrimination law—would prevent some of the grosser inequalities of power, status, and influence. Additional responsive measures could mitigate some emergent social inequalities without coercively controlling informal social choices.

First, institutional interventions could make certain informal choices more likely. Institutional action can shape the environment to create opportunities for greater integration or facilitate easier and more diverse interaction. To address educational homogamy, for example, a relational-egalitarian society could integrate educational institutions and shape public spaces to encourage heterogamous choices. Second, institutions could dampen the material consequences of some emergent social inequalities. They can eliminate institutional sources of prestige that lead to educational homogamy or provide robust social supports that reduce the incentives to choose marital partners for economic reasons. Third, institutional speech can express and defend relational-egalitarian values (to make the case for more egalitarian patterns of esteem or informal choices), or publicly praise some kinds of informal social choices as conducive to relational equality, even where it would be improper to impose requirements on individuals to choose in a certain fashion. Those kinds of institutional responsive measures would certainly produce a much different social world than the one we experience, and they foreseeably could eliminate many forms of emergent social inequality.

It is unlikely that institutional action alone will always be sufficient to adequately prevent or eliminate all sources of emergent social inequalities. There are manifold possible causes of emergent social inequality, and it would be a herculean task to foresee or respond to all of them. The starting points of emergent social inequality are subtle, they may not be obvious even to conscientious individuals, and once differentials in status or esteem are produced they may be hard to eliminate. Whereas classic examples of relational inequalities can be easy to identify, some emergent social inequalities could be difficult to measure. Finally, the distribution of social connections and esteem recognition ultimately depends on individual action. When the relevant worries concern social norms and networks of intimate relationships and personal evaluations, institutional policy is a blunt tool. Relational equality still seems to be the kind of thing that is not directly achievable by institutions alone.

What would individuals have to do to entirely eliminate the threat emergent social inequalities pose to relational equality? Since individuals could not accurately judge how every decision about whom to befriend, where to live, or what associations to join would contribute to such inequalities, they cannot be obligated to always avoid contributing to emergent social inequalities. Furthermore, it would be ineffective to require individuals to choose their friends and partners for political reasons, since genuine relationships cannot be forced.

Individuals could prevent some emergent social inequalities by changing informal social norms and practices, without giving up all intimate social choices to collective determination. It may be fairly predictable that some general kinds of informal social choices will exacerbate social stratification or status hierarchies (e.g., exclusively associating with fellow members of a professional elite in exclusive clubs, private schools, or gated communities). A liberal society is compatible with public discussion of such norms and strenuous criticism of objectionable forms of exclusivity. As it becomes clear that other kinds of informal social choices, less obviously objectionable in themselves, lead to emergent social inequality, similar forms of social sanctioning might be brought to bear.

At a certain point, though, individuals cannot help change informal norms and practices without simply giving up discretion over informal social choices. The more worrisome possibilities would involve differentials in status, power, and influence that arise from individual choices that are not vicious or objectionable in themselves. Liberals can readily accept demands on individual comportment in public spaces, norms of interaction with strangers, or in formal institutions as citizens. They will be more reluctant to accept relational-egalitarian influence over norms governing the formation of relationships (i.e., how and when individuals choose friends) or the inner life of personal relationships themselves (e.g., what favors one is willing to do for romantic partners or religious co-adherents). Collective regulation of whom people choose to form personal relationships with, how they generally act in those relationships, or what they esteem would quickly run afoul of liberal commitments.

Relational equality can be more or less perfectly realized. Full, perfect relational equality requires a social world in which power and status differentials do not impede that deliberative practice. If the full realization of relational equality depends on the elimination or serious mitigation of emergent social inequalities, then it could come into sharp conflict with the liberal commitment to broad individual discretion in personal decisions. That is true even if relational egalitarianism does not impose a direct obligation on individuals to make each informal choice by reference to a relational-egalitarian standard. Reshaping informal social practices to prevent such inequalities could still intervene dramatically on what are considered personal choices. That could require changing the felicity conditions for the formation of informal relationships, expectations and demands on partners and friends, what constitutes sufficient justification for exclusivity, and the norms of public praise. The worry is that successfully addressing emergent social inequalities would require that many informal social choices be pervasively dictated by the demands of political morality.

**3. Fair Relational Equality**

How ought we respond to the possibility of conflict between liberal and relational-egalitarian commitments? Alternative conceptions of relational egalitarianism or liberalism that would avoid this worry are unpalatable. To adopt a conception of relational egalitarianism that does not recognize some emergent social inequalities as worrisome would be to thoroughly undermine the appeal of this type of egalitarianism, to permit pernicious if subtler hierarchies of power, status, and influence. On the other side, carving out an attractive liberal position that does not protect substantial discretion in personal life seems well-nigh impossible. What I want to suggest is that, depending on their social contingencies of their world, liberal relational egalitarians may ultimately have to reconcile themselves to an imperfectly realized form of relational equality, and that this in itself is not a capitulation to injustice. Liberal commitments are at least compatible with the achievement of what can be called *fair relational equality*, which is more robust than merely formal relational equality but weaker than full or perfect relational equality.

Presented with a possible conflict between liberalism and relational equality, why accept fair relational equality instead of the imperfect realization of the liberal ideal? The same arguments that Rawlsians provide for the priority of liberty over the Difference Principle might be offered here, in recognition of the importance that people would place on the exercise of these fundamental individual liberties. Second, it is not obvious that by abandoning liberal commitments one could fully realize relational equality, if doing so involved the attempt to coercively create genuine social relations of one form or another.

Before characterizing fair relational equality further, though, it is worthwhile to note how this differs from a familiar egalitarian position. Larry Temkin has argued that most egalitarians today are pluralists—they recognize that equality is not all that is important, and that there are some circumstances where it may not be pursued further (2003, 63).[[22]](#footnote-22) On his view, it is sometimes more important to heed values of efficiency or compassion. So many egalitarians claim that we should accept an imperfect form of equality in some circumstances. What distinguishes the argument I make here?

First, of course, Temkin’s characterization of egalitarianism—as a concern about the distribution of welfare—is at odds with the relational egalitarian view (which treats distributive concerns as important but ultimately derivative). The appeal to pluralism is often offered as a response to the leveling down objection, which is not as pressing a worry for relational egalitarianism as it is for equality of welfare. So a relational egalitarian view that makes similar concessions to value pluralism will likely be responding to different problems and may strike a different balance.

Second, this argument goes beyond the claim that we can only pursue equality so far or to a certain degree. Fair relational equality also accepts value pluralism—we may fail to fully realize relational equality in order to honor and promote other values—but this position requires more work for relational egalitarians than for distributive egalitarians, because more needs to be said about acceptable if imperfect social relations. Relational egalitarians need to know what we can reasonably hope for and to help identify whether there are circumstances in which we should not directly pursue a perfect realization itself. This strategy does not require preemptively abandoning the aspiration for full relational equality, but there may be circumstances where the informal social practices of the second-best world diverge considerably from the world of full relational equality.

The idea of fair relational equality is inexactly analogous to how Rawlsian liberals respond to the threat the family poses to equality of opportunity.[[23]](#footnote-23) Rawlsian fair equality of opportunity aims to correct for social contingencies but not for differentials in natural abilities and talents. Rawls notes that this ambition (to ensure that those with equal talents and willingness to use them have the same prospects of success) will be stymied “as long as some form of the family exists” (1999, 64). The reason for this is straightforward: families and other kinds of private relations can transmit unequal resources and opportunities that cannot be easily corrected. If individuals’ basic liberties of association (including the liberty to form families and to conduct the internal life of those families on their own terms, within certain limits) take lexical priority over a principle of equal opportunity, then equality of opportunity cannot be perfectly secured. Imperfectly realized fair equality of opportunity is still a principle of equality of opportunity, despite its tacit acceptance of something short of the full ideal. It does not offer a wholly novel conception of how we ought to distribute opportunities for positions; rather, it is characterized by its acceptance of partial success. There is reason to endorse (imperfectly realized) fair equality of opportunity because of its place in a set of principles of justice.

Fair relational equality pursues a similar strategy. If our informal social interaction can give rise to emergent social inequalities, and there are some circumstances in which we cannot fully eliminate them without abandoning central liberal commitments, then the liberal relational egalitarian can accept a set of practices and norms that will imperfectly realize relational equality. If the emergent social inequalities are comparatively small, the liberal relational egalitarian has good reason to give priority to the exercise of fundamental individual liberties. Assuming individuals have an important interest in being able to plan their own lives and pursue their own conceptions of the good, some failures to fully satisfy the egalitarian deliberative constraint may be acceptable, without having to abandon a commitment to relational equality.

A world in which individuals have significant discretion over their social choices may well produce emergent social inequalities, in which some voices have greater influence and some groups have greater power through their social networks. The informal social sphere could continue to produce epistemic injustices, insofar as those with smaller social networks could be less well understood and their interests less intelligible. Some social networks may continue to be more powerful and influential because of individuals’ associative choices. Those who are admired may continue to receive greater influence, in ways that broadly affect societal deliberation.

What fair relational equality looks like would vary from one set of social circumstances to another, depending on the emergent social inequalities that arise and how well they can be addressed. In order to defend the fair-relational-equality strategy, we need some standard for adjudicating what, short of full or perfect relational equality, still meaningfully constitutes a form of relational equality at all. Fair relational equality should be understood in terms of two criteria, which I can begin to explain here. First, there is a *reasons-for-failure* requirement: a society only realizes fair relational equality if failure to realize the full ideal is due to other demands of justice. Second, there is a *reasonable approximation* requirement: if the society in question has profound hierarchies of power, status, and influence, we should instead say that relational equality is impossible under those circumstances.

The first criterion, subject to further qualification, implies that fair relational equality should require that the members of society do everything they can to dampen or eliminate residual inequalities up to the point at which they would have to sacrifice other fundamental commitments of justice. While this standard requires further elaboration and specification in concrete contexts, it picks out the idea that a society is not meaningfully committed to relational equality if its members refuse to take the available liberal measures for eliminating recalcitrant, objectionable inequalities. Such a refusal would reflect a lack of sincere commitment to the relational egalitarian ideal.

As part of the effort to meet that demand, members of society would treat the broad contours of the organization of informal social life as an object of collective deliberation, in an effort to shape the informal social environment. The society committed to relational equality would take all available steps, up to the point at which further effort to achieve relational equality would threaten liberal commitments to allow individuals to direct their own lives in personal matters and to pursue their own conception of the good. Responsive institutional measures would be adopted to prevent or mitigate emergent social inequalities. Informal social norms might shift—individuals might ask each other to refrain from some practices, reject some exclusionary standards, or cultivate alternatives. They would not, however, recognize a duty to select intimate partners according to a political formula, or a duty to abandon projects or values that fit within the spectrum of reasonable conceptions, even if that pursuit leads to some emergent social inequality.

The second criterion is that the resultant society must be a reasonable approximation of the relational-egalitarian ideal. At a minimum, the society that realizes fair relational equality has the same major sociopolitical institutions as the world of full relational equality, and it has eliminated significant forms of oppression. Some relatively subtle differences in the influence that different groups possess, or small differences in the resources they possess, are compatible with holding that they have nevertheless achieved an imperfect form of relational equality. By contrast, it would be absurd to say that a world with a caste-like status hierarchy should count as satisfying relational egalitarianism, no matter how it arose. Under circumstances where a profound inequality could not be eliminated, it would be more apt to say that no form of relational equality was within reach. (Whether it is acceptable to maintain a commitment to liberalism in such circumstances is a question I do not settle here.) While there is an obvious difference between recalcitrant subtle inequalities of power and influence that might color an otherwise egalitarian relationship and the kind of profound inequalities exemplified by a caste system, further work would be needed to show exactly where to draw the line.[[24]](#footnote-24)

How does fair relational equality differ from what many relational egalitarians have defended? Many existing accounts of relational equality would allow some differentials of power, influence, and status. Anderson’s criticism of luck egalitarians as being “oblivious to the proper limits of state power” (1999, 288), for instance, presents relational egalitarianism as being focused on a select set of goods and less intrusive than the alternatives. Likewise, some have argued that what relational equality itself requires is limited by what individuals can demand of one another (and so to be connected to or just identified with some subset of second-personal claims).[[25]](#footnote-25) If it is unreasonable to demand more of individuals than what I have described above, they might well say that what is accomplished should count as full relational equality.

While understanding what we can reasonably demand from one another can help reconcile us to persistent differentials, we are not forced to conclude that the result must be the perfect realization of relational equality. When deliberation is colored by lingering, unjustifiable differentials in power, status, and influence, we have good reason not to call the result full relational equality—maintaining an awareness of this failure reminds us of how an all-things-considered acceptable arrangement can still disadvantage some. Full relational equality does not require absolute homogeneity or perfect equality of power, status, and influence. However, it is impeded by inequalities of power, status, and influence that affect the practice of shared deliberation, and well as those inequalities that could not satisfy the EDC. In terms of concrete requirements, then, fair relational equality may approximate what others have argued is required by relational equality. Where it differs is in the recognition that the social relations in an otherwise ideal liberal state may still only partially realize the relational-egalitarian ideal.

Alternatively, critics might object that fair relational equality is not a real form of relational equality at all. If there are still recalcitrant inequalities in power, status, and influence in this envisioned liberal society, in what sense are these kinds of relationships just? The answer to that question parallels what the Rawlsian must say about fair equality of opportunity—namely, that the appropriate question is about the justice of the system as a whole. If the just society rightly gives priority to the protection of fundamental individual liberties, and this constrains the kind of relational equality that can be achieved, then fair relational equality may be part of a just system.

More work is needed to determine where to draw the limit between fair relational equality and circumstances in which relational equality is simply impossible. However the line is ultimately drawn, though, the possibility of fair relational equality represents a promising and attractive option. A defense of the value of imperfectly realized relational equality can show why liberal relational egalitarians do not need to reject one of their constitutive commitments. Liberal relational egalitarianism is coherent, even if it requires acknowledging that some values may not be simultaneously realizable. The liberal relational egalitarian relies on a hope that severe emergent social inequalities can be avoided or mitigated. Whether that hope is justifiable may well depend on the contingent interplay of our informal social practices.

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1. For helpful comments on previous drafts, I wish to thank Henry Richardson, Judith Lichtenberg, Madison Powers, and audiences at the APA East and Virginia Philosophical Association meetings. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Most accounts of relational egalitarianism are liberal, in the sense of defending paradigmatically liberal individual rights and presuming an economic order that includes some forms of private property. See Anderson (1999), Miller (1997), Scheffler (2003) for early articulations of relational egalitarianism and Schemmel (2011), Hull (2015), and Fourie, Schupper, and Wallimann-Helmer (2015) for recent developments. The possibility of more radical forms of relational egalitarianism is discussed in Baker (2015) and Schemmel (2012), both of which consider how a relational egalitarian might reject typical liberal divisions of moral labor. There is a generic sense in which value pluralists recognize that not all values can be realized at once, but concerns specifically about social equality and informal social choices have not been discussed. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For examples of this non-ideal, ameliorative focus, see Anderson (2009), Knight (2014), and Wolff (2015). My approach is distinct—rather than starting from real-world inequalities, I start from a positive, ideal-theoretic conception of relational equality (on all of Valentini’s [2012] ways of understanding ideal theory—assuming full compliance, not adjusting for political feasibility, and focusing on an ideally just end state) and argue that there are apt to be impediments to the realization of that ideal under liberal constraints. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Relational egalitarians have explicitly imagined the need for differentiated systems of education. See Anderson (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Alternatively, one might hope that individuals sort into appropriate “noncomparing groups,” each with their own ideals and values (Rawls [1999], 387). Such a sorting would blunt the impact of being found deficient, since it would not communicate a unified societal judgment. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Inequalities of wealth and income are objectionable on relational egalitarian grounds to the extent that they frustrate the creation and maintenance of egalitarian social relations. Schemmel (2011) argues compellingly that relational egalitarianism has derivative but quite demanding distributive requirements. I am not engaging here with questions of whether relational egalitarianism offers an alternative to so-called distributive egalitarianism; much of my argument is compatible with accepting a pluralist or hybrid view like Lippert-Rasmussen (2016, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Julius (2003) and Hodgson (2012) for interaction-focused conceptions of the basic structure of society. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Most obviously, considerable work would be needed to explain how to interpret people’s interests and how to weigh their comparative significance. Some objective interests—like an interest in being treated with respect and dignity—could be identified in advance and apply to all egalitarian relationships, but the subjective interests of the parties are discovered and developed through the deliberative process. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Theories of deliberative democracy offer resources for understanding how discussion and decision-making can be mediated through multiple institutions and spaces. See Christiano (1996, 87) and Richardson (2002, 92) for examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Elizabeth Anderson calls special attention to power, status, and influence as relevant to relational equality in “Equality” (2012a), and I follow that lead here. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I suspect that there is a structural resemblance between deliberative-practice theories of relational equality and the Scanlonian contractualist characterization of wrongness. On Scanlon’s view (1998), judgments about wrongness are judgments about what would not be permitted by principles that could not be reasonably rejected. That doesn’t mean, however, that assault isn’t objectionable because it harms someone—in fact that would be one of the reasons for reasonably rejecting principles that permitted assault—only that the appeal to standpoints and reasonable rejectability gives us a way of talking about what it is for something to be wrong. Likewise, deliberative-practice considerations aren’t meant to displace reasons for objecting to certain forms of treatment; rather, they characterize how people who are interacting as equals approach those reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Niko Kolodny’s (2014) argument about social equality and informal opportunities for influence is illustrative. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Seana Shiffrin describes a “fully directive” view of morality as one that holds that “for any decision one could make, assuming there are no ties, it yields a specific requirement about how one is to act” (2010, 136). There is some ambiguity in what it means for a view to impose a specific requirement. A requirement may leave an individual some room for discretion in fulfilling it (e.g., a soldier might be required to wear dress blues or battle fatigues at work). On the other hand, a requirement is not imposed any time one’s set of options is limited (e.g., one may be free to choose one’s own diet even if the sale of arsenic for consumption is prohibited). In this context, what I mean is that the liberal holds that whether a society is just will not be dependent on how individuals make a number of personal choices. Perhaps one could say that liberals think that society can be structured so that individuals can make a certain set of decisions for purely personal reasons, because principles of justice will not speak directly to those choices. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I do think a commitment like this is a central part of most interpretations of liberalism, but ultimately I am more interested in potential conflicts between relational egalitarianism and this commitment than in a terminological dispute. For discussion of competing definitions of liberalism, see Dworkin (1985), Waldron (1987), and Gaus (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This is distinct from Kevin Vallier’s discussion of social injustice as an emergent property (2013). He has in mind a way of explaining phenomena like structural racism, and the emergent property in question is the injustice of the social institutions. I am simply concerned with how distributions of power, status, and influence can be shaped by the cumulative effects of individual social decisions. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Anderson (1999) defends both ideas, and many relational egalitarians have likewise argued or presupposed as much. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Daniel Putnam’s “Equality of Intelligibility” (2015) helps explain why those who take up the deliberative conception of relational equality need to be concerned with how well everyone’s interests are understandable to others. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The literature on implicit attractiveness bias illustrates one possibility (Rhode, 2010; Hamermesh, 2011). The phenomenon of cumulative advantage, by which individuals who are highly esteemed earn disproportionate attention and further credit, illustrates another way in which esteem inequalities could intensify over time (Merton, 1968; Rigney, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This would be broadly similar to Neuhouser’s (2014, ch. 2) reading of Rousseau, in which social contingencies can shape highly malleable passions and enflame *amour-propre.* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The question whether emergent differentials in power, status, and influence threaten the process of egalitarian deliberation is distinct from the question whether they are personally deserved. Differences in status that track genuine differences in admirable qualities might be deserved and yet still a worry for the possibility of relating as equals. On the other hand, status differentials that are wholly arbitrary and undeserved might pose less of a threat to deliberation in some cases, if they are less pervasive or have less of an impact on deliberation. This is not a worry for relational egalitarians, since arbitrary status differentials might also be objectionable because they do not equally respect all. Beyond this, not all matters of personal desert or interpersonal ethics need to be resolved by a political ideal of relational equality. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This does not say much about how such decisions should be made—what forums are appropriate, what decision procedures should be used, or what level of specificity is needed. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See also Parfit (1997) and O’Neill (2008, 143–4). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. To be precise, I don’t think Rawls contrasts ‘fair equality of opportunity’ with ‘full/perfect equality of opportunity’; rather, he says “the principle of fair equality of opportunity can be only imperfectly carried out, at least as long as the institution of the family exists” (1999, 64). ‘Fair’ indicates a richer version of the ideal than merely formal versions, but I want to use it for the further purpose of distinguishing an imperfect but justifiable version of the ideal from one that is perfectly or fully carried out. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This problem is not unique to fair relational equality—something similar applies to imperfectly realized fair equality of opportunity. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Anderson (2012b). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)