

## Why Be a Relational Egalitarian?

This is a prepublication draft. The final version published in: *The Philosophical Forum*. First published: 07 October 2023 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/phil.12350>)

### Introduction

Relational egalitarianism has been presented, developed, and defended by a group of philosophers, including Elizabeth Anderson, David Miller, and Samuel Scheffler.<sup>1</sup> For relational egalitarians, justice requires that everyone relates to one another as equals.<sup>2</sup> Although the desirability of living as equals seems quite intuitive, relational egalitarians do not agree on why it is desirable, and more specifically, why it is required for justice.

Here I distinguish among three accounts of the desirability of the ideal of living as equals: the ideal of “living as equals” is instrumentally valuable; the state of affairs “living as equals” is non-instrumentally valuable; “living as equals” is inherently desirable or it is morally required to live as equals in a non-consequentialist sense. In this paper, I examine these accounts in turn. Although the former two accounts capture some of the reasons for “living as equals,” I argue that they cannot provide satisfying reasons for being a relational egalitarian on their own, i.e., for preferring relational egalitarianism to other competing theories. When the ideal of “living as equals” is understood as a moral requirement in the non-consequentialist sense, I argue, it provides the best and most fundamental reason for being a relational egalitarian. I do not attempt

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<sup>1</sup> Some influential relational egalitarians at least include David Miller (1995, 1997), Iris Marion Young (1990), Elizabeth Anderson (1999a, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2016, 2017), Joshua Cohen (1989), T. M. Scanlon (2002, 2018), and Samuel Scheffler (2003, 2005, 2010, 2015). But people use different terms for their positive views—the terms at least include “social equality,” “democratic equality,” “relational equality,” and “equality of status.” In this paper, I consider relational egalitarianism in an inclusive sense, and discuss people’s disagreements only when necessary or helpful.

<sup>2</sup> Note that I use “only if” instead of “if” here. This is because relational egalitarians usually believe the ideal of living as equals is fundamental for a theory of justice, and they also pursue other values such as social welfare. The terms such as “just” and “justice” is used in an intuitive sense.

to claim that everyone ought to be a relational egalitarian, or you cannot be a relational egalitarian without endorsing the non-consequentialist account. Rather, I just attempt to show that the most fundamental reason to believe that “living as equals” is morally required is the non-consequentialist reason.

In Section 1, I provide what I think is the best account of what relational egalitarianism requires, though my conclusion of this paper is neutral to different accounts. In Section 2, I provide four criteria for a good account for the desirability of living as equals. Broadly speaking, a good account ought to show that relational egalitarianism is i) distinctive from other theories, ii) provides guidance, iii) is appropriately motivating, and iv) provides sufficient reasons to pursue it. In Section 3, I introduce and discuss three main justifications for pursuing relational egalitarianism, which I call the Instrumental Value Account, the Non-Instrumental Value Account, and the Non-Consequentialist Account. The Instrumental Value Account claims that “living as equals” is instrumentally valuable because it is the means to social welfare or other good consequences such as developing the moral capacity of individuals. As relational egalitarians typically focus on opposing problematic social hierarchies, they emphasize the badness of those hierarchies. This account captures the disadvantages of problematic social hierarchies, and thus shows why to oppose them. The Non-Instrumental Value Account claims that the state of affairs of “living as equals,” i.e., equal social relations and certain structures based on the equal relations, constitutes good consequences. This account explains the goodness of equal social relationships, and thus shows why it is better to have them. The Non-Consequentialist Account claims that people ought to live as equals. This account states that we have enforceable obligations to live as equals, while the obligations could be explained in different ways. Although both the Instrumental Value Account and the Non-Instrumental Value

Account provide reasons for adopting relational egalitarianism, they do not provide an adequate moral foundation for relational egalitarianism. Instead, the Non-Consequentialist Account provides the strongest and most fundamental reason for relational egalitarianism. Section 4 points out that the Non-Consequentialist Account may face a dilemma: the more persuasive as a moral requirement the ideal of “living as equals” is, the less guidance it provides in terms of specific social problems. The dilemma, then, is either relational egalitarianism has a strong moral foundation but provides little in terms of guidance or it can offer more specific guidance but relies on a weaker foundation. In Section 5, I argue that this dilemma is a difficult one but is not fatal to the relational egalitarian project. First, all practical theories may face similar dilemmas when applied in real life. Second, relational egalitarianism has resources to support determinate and specific claims and stay intuitively appealing at the same time. Finally, in Section 6, I explore a pluralist account that combines the instrumental, the non-instrumental, and the non-consequentialist reasons.

## 1. What Is Relational Egalitarianism

Relational egalitarianism emerged initially from criticism of distributive egalitarianism. Distributive egalitarians pursue the equal distribution of certain goods, such as resources, well-being, capabilities, or some other substantive measures in a way that reflects the ideal of equality.<sup>3</sup> Relational egalitarians, instead, believe the point of equality is to live as equals. In other words, relational egalitarians usually accept the following:

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<sup>3</sup> This description is just a simple picture of distributive egalitarianism. Some philosophers who are usually seen as distributive egalitarians at least include G. A. Cohen (1989, 1993, 1995, 2000), Richard Arneson (1989, 2000, 2001), and Ronald Dworkin (1977, 2000, 2003). But people (including the so-called distributive egalitarians themselves) may not agree with the label and its definition.

*The ideal of living as equals:* A situation is desirable if everyone it involves relates to one another as equals.<sup>4</sup>

Based on this, the relational egalitarian conception of *justice* (also broadly understood) is as follows:

*Relational egalitarianism (i.e., justice as the ideal of living as equals):* A situation is just only if everyone it involves relates to one another as equals.

To make sense of the ideal of living as equals, i.e., “everyone relates to another as equals,” we need to answer when the state of affairs or “living as equals” obtains. My account is as follows:

*Living as equals:* A person P lives as an equal, *if and only if* (1) P’s social identity is not stigmatized; (2) P is treated with equal respect; (3) there is no disposition that P’s significant interests are treated as less weighty than others’; (4) P is regarded as an equal; (5) there is no domination power over P.

For simplicity, we could say that relational egalitarianism is opposed to the problematic hierarchies of esteem, respect, deliberation, attitudes, and power.<sup>5</sup> Or more simply, relational egalitarians requires that people live without problematic social hierarchies. Although people disagree on how to understand the ideal of “living as equals,” I do not consider the disagreements and avoid relying on one particular account in this paper. It would be enough to know that relational egalitarianism is opposed to problematic social hierarchies, and people may have their favorite account in mind.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, my account above could be one choice.

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<sup>4</sup> The terms such as “situation” and “desirable” are only used in an intuitive sense here.

<sup>5</sup> According to Anderson (2012), relational egalitarianism is opposed to the problematic hierarchies of domination, esteem, and standing.

<sup>6</sup> For some accounts of “living as equals,” see Anderson (2012), Lippert-Rasmussen (2018), Nath (2020), and Schemmel (2021).

Although the ideal of “living as equals” seems quite intuitive, the reason for pursuing the ideal is often not made clear or presented in a unified way.<sup>7</sup> I suppose it is so mainly because most relational egalitarians originally emerged as the critics of distributive egalitarians, who usually focus on the objections to the distributive claims. In addition, they tend to combine egalitarian theory with political claims and talk of the underlying motivations for social movements rather than clearly providing a moral foundation for the view. As such, it seems they provide a fairly wide variety of reasons for pursuing the ideal of living as equals. However, as a result, there is no clear picture for the moral foundations for relational egalitarianism, which can leave the view open to criticisms from its opponents.

Most relational egalitarians begin with the bad consequences that result from problematic social hierarchies. For example, Anderson believes that the problematic social hierarchies lead to other unacceptable inequalities: “those of higher rank enjoy greater rights, privileges, opportunities, or benefits than their social inferiors.”<sup>8</sup> However, many relational egalitarians do not appeal to the consequentialist considerations when evaluating the ideal of “living as equals.” For example, Gideon Elford argues that the principle of moral equality in relational egalitarianism cannot be simply explained by an account of social well-being.<sup>9</sup> Anderson herself also explicitly claims that “I do not believe that any interpretation of this principle of moral equality will yield moral precepts of a consequentialist form.”<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, when arguing for relational egalitarianism, some relational egalitarians focus on the advantages of equal social relations themselves. For example, Martin

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<sup>7</sup> For some discussions on the desirability of the ideal of “living as equals,” see Tomlin (2014), Lippert-Rasmussen (2018), Miklosi (2018), Nath (2020), and Schemmel (2021).

<sup>8</sup> Anderson (2012, p. 43).

<sup>9</sup> Elford (2017, p. 86).

<sup>10</sup> Anderson (1999b).

O'Neill believes that unequal social relations cannot be "healthy and fraternal."<sup>11</sup> Scheffler also believes that only equal social relations are "truthful," and cannot be replaced with unequal social relations.<sup>12</sup> It is controversial whether relational egalitarianism should focus on the social relations themselves, though. For example, Carina Fourie believes that the main problem of social hierarchies is not the feature of the unequal social relations themselves but the harm to one's moral, emotional, and cognitive capacities and virtues.<sup>13</sup>

I do not claim that the disagreements above are fundamental or that the accounts for pursuing relational egalitarianism cannot be compatible with each other. Actually, some relational egalitarians such as Anderson accept various ways of defending relational egalitarianism, as I will in the end as well.<sup>14</sup> However, although there may be different reasons for accepting relational egalitarianism, an evaluation of those accounts reveals that some of them are stronger and more fundamental than others. This is because relational egalitarianism does not only imply that the ideal of "living as equals" is simply worth pursuing, but that the ideal is necessary for justice, which distinguishes relational egalitarianism from other theories. So, a good account for pursuing the ideal of "living as equals" ought to show that relational egalitarianism is distinctive from other theories, provides guidance, grounds appropriate motivations, and provide sufficient reasons to pursue it. Therefore, it demands stronger reasons to become a relational egalitarian than merely endorsing the ideal of "living as equals." It does not mean that relational egalitarianism cannot be compatible with other theories, though.

## 2. The Criteria for a Good Account for the Desirability of "Living as Equals"

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<sup>11</sup> O'Neill (2008, p. 127).

<sup>12</sup> Scheffler (2005, p. 19).

<sup>13</sup> Fourie (2012, pp. 119-121).

<sup>14</sup> For example, see Anderson (2012), and Schemmel (2021).

A good account for the desirability of “living as equals,” i.e., the answer to the question “why to be a relational egalitarian,” ought to satisfy four criteria, as follows:

*Distinction Criterion:* The account shows that the ideal of living as equals is distinct from alternative theories, rather than it could be simply replaced with or reduced to other theories of justice.

It is not hard to understand the purpose of the Distinction Criterion. When people identify themselves as relational egalitarians, they believe that relational egalitarianism is preferred to other alternative theories, e.g., distributive egalitarianism. If they do not pursue anything different from other theorists, then they do not have a good reason to be a relational egalitarian.<sup>15</sup> That is, if an account views relational egalitarianism as good as its alternative, e.g., distributive egalitarianism, then it does not provide a strong reason for being a relational egalitarian. The Distinction Criterion, as a criterion to evaluate the fundamental reason for pursuing relational egalitarianism, would prefer the accounts that treat relational egalitarianism as irreplaceable and prior to other theories.

*Motivation Criterion:* The account shows that we could have appropriate motivations to pursue the ideal of living as equals.

The Motivation Criterion implies that we believe that we ought to pursue an ideal or adopt certain actions with the appropriate motivations. For example, donating to the poor is usually worth praising. But if people believe that donating is worth doing *only* because it will make people praise them and bring good fame, then it seems to provide bad motivation. A good

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<sup>15</sup> It does not mean that relational egalitarians must adopt different policies or practical solutions from other theories such as distributive egalitarians, as different theories could endorse similar egalitarian provisos in practice.

account ought to show that it provides appropriate reasons to motivate people to pursue relational egalitarianism, rather than misguides people to do so (i.e., by providing inappropriate reasons). It only evaluates whether an account could provide appropriate reasons, rather than the people who pursue relational egalitarianism.<sup>16</sup>

*Sufficiency Criterion:* The account shows that we have sufficient and strong reasons to pursue the ideal of living as equals, rather than we have merely *pro tanto* reasons to do so.

A relational egalitarian conception of justice commits to the ideal of living as equals, which implies that the ideal of living as equals is a *necessary* and fundamental part of justice. If there are only *pro tanto* reasons to pursue the ideal of living as equals, then it could be easily outweighed by other considerations in many cases—even non-egalitarians may accept the ideal of living as equals, though they argue that it is outweighed by other ideals, e.g., individual rights.<sup>17</sup> Relational egalitarianism, as a political theory and a version of liberal egalitarianism, agrees that both the principle of equality and the principle of individual rights are fundamental and necessary for justice. It implies that a situation cannot be just if the principle of living as equals is disobeyed. So, the principle of living as equals cannot be overridden by other concerns

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<sup>16</sup> For example, suppose that one person is unable to develop appropriate motivations and thus cannot endorse relational egalitarianism with appropriate motivations. In this case, it does not show that relational egalitarianism and relevant accounts of its desirability are problematic. Rather, it may be due to the capacities of the person, or bad social impacts on the individual. I thank one reviewer for raising this clarification suggestion.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Samuel Freeman (2011) distinguishes between the classical liberal tradition and the high liberal tradition, although both traditions seem to commit to some distributive egalitarian policies. Classical liberals such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Thomas Malthus are not distributive egalitarians, as they do not see the ideal of equality as fundamental for justice. Distributive egalitarians hold a stronger claim as they believe a conception of justice ought to commit to the ideal of equality, and thus belong to the high liberal tradition.



in the domain of justice.<sup>18</sup> With the Sufficiency Criterion, one's endorsement in relational egalitarianism is stable.

*Practice Criterion:* The account shows that relational egalitarianism provides some practical and determinate guidance.

When providing reasons for a certain theory, it may be tempting to make the theory nearly hollow and thus freed from substantial objections. For example, it is hard to disagree that we ought not to create harm, but it cannot tell us what to do in social problems without determinate claims (e.g., whether certain actions are causing harm). We are facing many controversial issues in social life. For example, some support strong social welfare policies while others do not. We want some good political theories to help us solve difficult problems and develop social institutions, e.g., selecting the best social policy that reflects the principles of justice and fairness and justifying certain solutions. As a theory of justice, relational egalitarianism is supposed to provide not only a criterion of justice (i.e., justice requires that people live as equals) but also some practical guidance on those problems (e.g., identify the main social hierarchies). And to achieve this goal, it has to show some kind of determinacy, i.e., being able to provide specific solutions to problems in practice. I call this the Practice Criterion, i.e., provide at least some determinate standards and directions for social policies and practical life.<sup>19</sup> If not, people may think the ideal of living as equals is no more than an intuitive but hollow ideal, rather than a relational egalitarian theory of justice.

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<sup>18</sup> In the meantime, outside the domain of justice (e.g., in cases that are not subordinate to coercive power), the concern of living as equals may be less demanding. For example, it seems permissible to be partial to our intimates rather than treat everyone equally. In this paper, I only consider the political theory of relational egalitarianism, which claims that living as equals is necessary for justice. I thank one reviewer for raising this clarification suggestion.

<sup>19</sup> But it does not mean that relational egalitarianism must always provide determinate and uncontroversial directions either, as that is unrealistic for any practical theory.

### 3. Three Accounts of the Desirability of “Living as Equals”

There are three main accounts of the desirability of “living as equals.” I call them the Instrumental Value Account, the Non-Instrumental Value Account, and the Non-Consequentialist Account. I will discuss them in turn.

#### 3.1 The Instrumental Value Account

Many believe that the ideal of “living as equals” is instrumentally valuable. To say something is instrumentally valuable is to say that it constitutes a means to or causes another thing that is valuable. For example, assume that health is valuable for us, as we value health for itself. A vitamin pill, then, is also valuable for us because the vitamin pill promotes health. In this case, we see health as non-instrumentally valuable and the vitamin pill as instrumentally valuable. When people say that the ideal of “living as equals” is instrumentally valuable, they claim that the “living as equals” causes or leads to some good consequences. In other words, they accept the following:

*Instrumental Value Account:* The ideal of “living as equals” is desirable because it is instrumentally valuable, i.e., it constitutes a means to something, valuable in itself.

We can distinguish between two versions of this account. The first version focuses on the welfare (i.e., how well people’s lives go) brought by the state of affairs “living as equals.” Here I use “welfare” in a broad sense, which includes various goods that affect and measure the level of how one’s life goes. So, relational egalitarians may accept:

*Welfare View*: The ideal of “living as equals” is instrumentally valuable because it increases social welfare.<sup>20</sup>

This view seems direct and intuitive—if people do not live as equals, it seems bad for people’s welfare. In other words, problematic social hierarchies have a negative impact on welfare. That is because if one is dominated by others, stigmatized, or is regarded or treated as an inferior, then typically one has access to fewer social goods and thus leads a worse life.

Anderson says, that

[t]he interests of those occupying inferior positions are neglected or carry little weight in the deliberations of others and in the normal operation of social institutions. As a result, social inferiors are marginalized: They lack the rights, privileges, opportunities, or benefits that their superiors enjoy.<sup>21</sup>

For example, assume that an equally qualified female engineer and a male engineer apply for the same position in a famous company. Because of sexist norms and practices, the female engineer is rejected and the male engineer is hired instead. In this case, the female engineer is treated in a stigmatized way associated with her gender, which deprives her of a good opportunity that is probably important for her well-being. This consideration works on an institutional or social level as well. For example, we could conceive that the inferior groups typically lack opportunities to create and produce social goods even when they are more qualified than other groups in some cases. And in these cases, the more qualified people lose the

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<sup>20</sup> This view is discussed at least by (but not only by) Hinton (2001), Scheffler (2005), Wolff & de-Shalit (2007), Wolff (2009, 2010), Anderson (2012), Cordelli (2015), Gheaus (2016), and Nath (2020). Note that I do not claim that all of them are relational egalitarians, the same below. After all, distributive egalitarians and even non-egalitarians such as libertarians could happily accept this view as well.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson (2012, p. 43).

opportunities to create social goods, which lowers the efficiency of the whole society and thus brings less welfare for everyone. There have been some studies on the bad influence of inequalities on societies. For example, some have found that health and social problems (including homicides, mental illness, social trust, infant mortality, etc.) are worse in more unequal societies, which, according to their analysis, are not related to the average income.<sup>22</sup>

Although direct and intuitive, the Welfare View is not a good option for relational egalitarians. The biggest problem, I believe, is its outspoken commitment to distributive terms. In other words, the Welfare View seems to say that the ideal of “living as equals” is desirable because it leads to a better distribution of goods and therefore greater welfare. But if so, why don’t we just choose distributive egalitarianism?<sup>23</sup> Richard Arneson argues:

My simple proposed response...is to deny that the democratic equality ideal is correct at the level of fundamental moral principle but to allow that it might be endorsable from some non-fundamental standpoint. Instituting social arrangements that satisfy democratic equality might well be an effective means in circumstances like ours to achieve fulfillment of *the fundamental justice principles* [of a kind of distributive principle of justice] as best we can.<sup>24</sup>

For Arneson, the relational egalitarian ideal is no more than a means to the distributive egalitarian conception of justice.

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<sup>22</sup> According to Wilkinson & Pickett’s study (2010), for instance, more people suffer from mental illnesses in countries that are more unequal (p. 67). Life expectancy is also related to inequality (p. 82). Moreover, it seems that the lower life expectancy cannot be explained away by worse health behaviors (p. 84). Rather, it seems to be the cost of injustice in a more unequal society. I thank one reviewer for recommending empirical literature in understanding the instrumental value of equality.

<sup>23</sup> This objection is discussed at least by Cohen (2009), Arneson (2010), Lippert-Rasmussen (2018), and Miklosi (2018).

<sup>24</sup> Arneson (2010, p. 27). Emphasis added. The notion of “democratic equality” Arneson uses refers to the relational egalitarian ideal, i.e., the ideal of “living as equals.”

Relational egalitarians may reply that the egalitarian arrangements merely focused on the distributive goods cannot lead to the best outcomes for each individual, as equal social relationships (or the state of affairs of “living as equals”) play a crucial role here. But it is hard to see why distributive egalitarianism cannot claim that an equal distribution of certain social goods is more fundamental, and thus include the ideal of “living as equals” as one of the means that are considered in a distributive egalitarian theory. By seeing the ideal of “living as equals” as merely instrumentally valuable because it provides a better distribution of goods, we cannot get a sufficient reason for being a relational egalitarian, as distributive egalitarianism may seem preferable or more fundamental based on the same concern.<sup>25</sup> In other words, this account does not satisfy the Distinction Criterion.

The second version of the Instrumental Value Account differs from the former, as it focuses on a different set of valuable consequences, some which are not often emphasized. So, I call it the Consequence View:

*Consequence View:* The ideal of “living as equals” is instrumentally valuable, because it typically brings a variety of good consequences, and/or there will be bad consequences otherwise.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> I only compare two versions of egalitarianism here. Other theories of justice (e.g., some consequentialist ones) may pursue overall well-being as well, which implies they may include some equal social relationships in their arrangements when they are helpful, even if they usually do not do so. Besides, I do not imply relational egalitarianism is necessarily contradictory to distributive egalitarianism. I only say that this account might put distributive egalitarianism prior to or more fundamental than relational egalitarianism, and thus we cannot see relational egalitarianism as more appealing than distributive egalitarianism.

<sup>26</sup> To be clear, the Consequence View does not necessarily commit to consequentialism here. The Consequence View only states that the fact that the ideal of “living as equals” brings good consequences provides the reason for pursuing the ideal, rather than that the ideal is justified by the overall best consequences—the latter is a form of consequentialism.

We may see that the Consequence View does not exclude the Welfare View. But those accepting the Consequence View usually appeal to considerations that are typically not the object of equalization for distributive egalitarians.<sup>27</sup> For example, it is natural to see that the problematic social hierarchies damage one's self-worth. T.M. Scanlon says the following:

The experiential evil involved here can be characterized in several different ways—indeed, there are several different kinds of experience that one might have in mind... The first, more 'individualistic', characterization emphasizes what might be called damage to individuals' *sense of self-worth*: such things as feelings of inferiority and even shame resulting from the belief that one's life, abilities or accomplishments lack worth or are greatly inferior to those of others.<sup>28</sup>

But it is not just those at the bottom of objectionable social hierarchies that suffer; those at the top do as well. For example, consider a racist society in which "white" people are seen as superior to the "black" people. In this case, members of both groups are harmed. Those on top, in this case white people, suffer in terms of their moral, emotion and cognitive development. When people get used to the problematic hierarchies, they may become more uncaring and less compassionate, which makes their moral, emotional, and cognitive capacities flawed.<sup>29</sup> As Leo Tolstoy says, "If you feel pain, you're alive. If you feel other people's pain, you're a human being." Furthermore, those on the top of the social hierarchies may also feel more pressure to achieve and cannot pride themselves for their achievements because they benefit from the social

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<sup>27</sup> This view is discussed at least by (but not only by) Scanlon (2002), Anderson (2012), Fourie (2012), Nath (2020), Litalien (2021), and Schemmel (2021).

<sup>28</sup> Scanlon (2002, p. 51).

<sup>29</sup> This example comes from Fourie (2012, pp. 119-121), who distinguishes three kinds of ill effects on the superiors: impaired moral capacity; cognitive distortion; and emotional costs.

hierarchies.<sup>30</sup> For example, in a state where men are seen as superior to women, some boys who cannot get an excellent record in school may be humiliated by people (perhaps even their parents): “How could you do worse than *girls*?” In this case, a social hierarchy disadvantaging females actually harms males too.

As relational egalitarians typically focus on opposing problematic social hierarchies, they emphasize the badness of those hierarchies. For some relational egalitarians, the Instrumental Value Account (especially the one based on the Consequence View) captures the disadvantages of problematic social hierarchies directly, and thus shows why to oppose them. For example, as one could imagine, it is not easy to tell which sorts of social hierarchies are problematic and which are not. It seems the Instrumental Value Account has an advantage in explaining why certain social hierarchies are wrong.<sup>31</sup> For instance, when one is dominated by others, one’s agency (i.e., one’s capacity to set ends for themselves and to bring about those ends in this case) is harmed and reduced; when one is stigmatized, one’s sense of self is harmed as one’s social identity is deeply affected. And that is where the domination power and stigmatization are problematic in some’s eyes.

The Consequence View shows some distinct advantages for pursuing “living as equals.” For example, as the Consequence View includes goods that are typically not the object of equalization for distributive egalitarians, e.g., moral, emotional, and cognitive capacities, relational egalitarianism may distinguish itself from the standard version of distributive

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<sup>30</sup> Anderson (2012, pp. 44-45) also says that “Egalitarians evaluate social inequality from all three perspectives...they argue that it is *bad* for people—not just for those occupying inferior ranks but also for those in superior positions and for society as a whole; and they argue that it is *vicious*: It corrupts the characters of superiors and subordinates alike while the ideologies that rationalize hierarchy pass off vices as virtues and condemn virtues as if they were vices.”

<sup>31</sup> For example, see Litalien (2021).

egalitarianism.<sup>32</sup> However, this view is ultimately unsatisfying. This is because the Consequence View seems to miss the point of “living as equals.” It is strange to say that we pursue the ideal of “living as equals” because it leads to greater social welfare or more fully developed moral capacities. Imagine that you ask someone who is inferior now why he pursues being an equal, and he says, “Well. Because I feel emotional costs for being an inferior.” The emotional cost is probably the product of unequal social relations, but it is strange to pursue being equals only for curing emotional harm. Or imagine that you ask someone who is superior now why to pursue being an equal, and he says, “Because I want to develop my moral, emotional, and cognitive capacities by being an equal.” This does not seem to be the right reason for pursuing relational egalitarianism. Relational egalitarians believe that justice requires that everyone relates to one another as equals, which means that the ideal of “living as equals” is essentially necessary for justice in their eyes. However, if the needs for certain moral, emotional, and cognitive virtues (and other good outcomes stated above) constitute the (only) reason for pursuing the ideal of “living as equals,” it is hard to see why this ideal is necessary for justice. Consider the following case:

A Society with “Happy Slaves”: Imagine that there is an unequal society, some people in which live as superiors and others are inferiors. However, this society has a system of rules and educational plans for the superior groups, which develop their moral, emotional, and cognitive capacities and virtues. In the meantime, society has certain

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<sup>32</sup> This may be controversial. According to some recent versions of distributive egalitarianism (e.g., those focusing on the equality of opportunities or capabilities), distributive egalitarians could happily embrace similar concerns (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, pp. 198-200). If so, the distributive principle is more fundamental than relational egalitarianism, and thus the Consequence View still fails to satisfy the Distinction Criterion. But it is doubtful whether distributive egalitarians could succeed in explaining those goods as distributable in their framework.



arrangements to make the inferior not only have decent levels of social welfare but not suffer from low self-esteem in spite of not living as equals.

In this case, both the superiors and the inferiors get better consequences from the arrangements on social hierarchies, and they are happy with the arrangements. However, it is not the case that the superior groups or the inferior groups have weaker reasons to pursue the ideal of “living as equals,” if they are relational egalitarians. Rather, the superiors even get more unequal treatment, and it seems the inferiors are no more than a group of “happy slaves.”<sup>33</sup> For relational egalitarians, this shows that an instrumental perspective cannot be *fundamental* in the ideal of living as equals.

Some may admit that equal social relationships are instrumentally necessary for justice, as other arrangements cannot replace the functions of equal social relationships in developing personal virtues, and thus endorse relational egalitarianism. Nevertheless, as they have certain fundamental goals other than the ideal of “living as equals” such as developing perfect persons (and virtues) just like what distributive egalitarians do, the reason will fail to satisfy the Distinction Criterion. After all, relational egalitarianism does not seem preferable for them. Those people (probably distributive egalitarians) could have many substantial agreements with relational egalitarians in real life, as in their view, equal social relationships seem *practically* necessary for justice, i.e., equal social relationships are (instrumentally) necessary for justice given the facts about human society now. So, they can be seen as relational egalitarians in a practical sense as well. Relational egalitarians, on the other hand, claim that the ideal of “living

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<sup>33</sup> For example, see Herzog (1989, chap.7). According to Herzog, given those facts that people cannot decide, e.g., one’s parents and one’s genetic makeup, the “role differentiation” (or the “social hierarchies” in my use) is better for all and thus can be voluntarily chosen. For Herzog, this shows some weaknesses of the consent theory, which I cannot discuss here.

as equals” is *metaphysically* necessary for justice, which means the ideal is necessary for justice even in hypothetical cases.

It seems our intuitions imply that the ideal of “living as equals” cannot be *merely* instrumental, although the Instrumental Value Account could still provide some good reasons for relational egalitarianism. To sum up, the Instrumental Value Account (both the Welfare View and the Consequence View) leads to either the endorsement of distributive egalitarianism (and thus failing to fulfill the Distinction Criterion), or pursuing relational egalitarianism for bad motivations (and thus failing to fulfill the Motivation Criterion). I summarize the objections to the Instrumental Value Account as a “Wrong Reason Objection,” which shows that it does not provide a *fundamental* reason for being a relational egalitarian:

*Wrong Reason Objection:* If the state of affairs “living as equals” is desirable *only* because it typically brings good consequences for individuals, then it provides a wrong reason for pursuing “living as equals.”<sup>34</sup>

### 3.2 The Non-Instrumental Value Account

Different from the Instrumental Value Account, the Non-Instrumental Value Account sees the ideal of “living as equals” as intrinsically valuable, i.e., we value this ideal because it constitutes certain good consequences rather than it causes or leads to certain good consequences such as social welfare or personal virtues. So, this account commits to the following:

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<sup>34</sup> Note that I use “only because” instead of “because” here, as it seems the Instrumental Value Account still provides at least some good reasons for accepting relational egalitarianism. Although I call it the “Wrong Reason Objection,” I do not mean that the instrumental reasons are totally wrong. As I admit below, the Instrumental Value Account could still provide right and good reasons in some pluralist accounts. Rather, what I argue is that it would be wrong if the instrumental reasons constitute the *only* or the *fundamental* reason for pursuing relational egalitarianism.

*Non-Instrumental Value Account:* The ideal of “living as equals” is desirable, because the state of affairs of “living as equals” is non-instrumentally valuable, i.e., “living as equals” itself constitutes a kind of good consequence.

Although the Non-Instrumental Value Account focuses on the ideal of “living as equals” itself, it still asserts a consequence-based perspective and focuses on the consequences which are constituted by equal social relations and relevant social structures. Usually, relational egalitarians focus on reducing inequalities or ending oppression instead of merely repeating the goodness in the ideal of living as equals.<sup>35</sup> They tend to argue that equal social relations themselves are better (or more valuable) than the bad ones, i.e., the state of affairs “living as equals” is better (or more valuable) than the state of affairs “some are superior to others.”<sup>36</sup> For example, Martin O’Neill points out, Rawls seems to believe that “the existence of social relationships characterized by stark hierarchies of status, and marked by relations of domination, deference, and servility, preclude the existence of the sort of healthy fraternal social relations...”<sup>37</sup> Rawls says the following:

It is close to being wrong or unjust in itself in that in a status system, not everyone can have the highest rank. Status is a positional good, as is sometimes said. High status

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<sup>35</sup> Lippert-Rasmussen (2018, pp. 161-162) believes Anderson (2008, p. 145-146) claims that relational equality (as “freedom and autonomy,” according to Lippert-Rasmussen) itself is good for people when she says, “To be subject to another’s command threatens one’s interests, as those in command are liable to serve themselves at the expense of their subordinates. It threatens subordinates’ autonomy, their standing as self-governing individuals. Without substantial controls on the content of legitimate commands, subjection can also be degrading and humiliating. Even when superiors permit subordinates wide scope for acting, the latter may still live at the mercy of the former. *Such a condition of subjection to the arbitrary wills of others is objectionable in itself*, and has further objectionable consequences: timidity and self-censorship in the presence of superiors—or worse, grovelling and self-abasement.” (Emphasis added) Although it is possible to interpret Anderson this way, I think it is better to think what Anderson means here is “such a condition of subjection to the arbitrary wills of others is objectionable in itself” because it is morally *required*, rather than being just *valuable*.

<sup>36</sup> This view is discussed by (but not only by) Scanlon (2002, 2018), Scheffler (2005), O’Neill (2008), Fourie (2012), Nath (2020), and Schemmel (2021).

<sup>37</sup> O’Neill (2008, p. 127).

assumes other positions beneath it; so if we seek a higher status for ourselves, we in effect support a scheme that entails others' having a lower status. And so we like to think that those with higher status normally earn or achieve their position in appropriate ways that yield compensating benefits for the general good. Fixed status ascribed by birth, or by gender or race, is particularly odious.<sup>38</sup>

Healthy, fraternal social relations are valuable for people, and those social relations are typically equal. Unequal social relationships, on the other hand, are bad and unhealthy for both superiors and inferiors, Scanlon says:

The second category emphasizes damage to the bonds between people: what might be called the *loss of fraternity* resulting from great differences in people's material circumstances, accomplishments and the social importance accorded to them. Unlike the first, this is a loss suffered by the better off and worse off alike, and perhaps it is the more fully egalitarian of the two.<sup>39</sup>

Further, Scheffler argues that unequal social relationships are also *untruthful*, as "social hierarchies require stabilizing and sustaining myths."<sup>40</sup> For example, we may need certain myths to explain why some people are kings, princesses, dukes, or belong to noble families, while others are subordinate to them, because those social hierarchies usually cannot be explained by social or scientific evidence. Another (perhaps controversial) example here may be that some

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<sup>38</sup> Rawls (2001, p. 131).

<sup>39</sup> Scanlon (2002, p. 51). Emphasis added.

<sup>40</sup> See Scheffler (2005, p. 19). Although it seems that Scheffler views relational equality as necessary for and a means to avoiding untruthfulness, his account still treats the equal, truthful, and fraternal social relationships themselves as valuable. In other words, equal and truthful social relations (or the state of affairs of "living as equals") constitute something valuable for us— "to live in society as an equal among equals is a good thing in its own right." (p. 19) So, it is one kind of the Non-Instrumental Value Account. Differently, the Instrumental Value Account values something other than equal social relations (or the state of affairs of "living as equals") such as social welfare. I thank one reviewer for this clarification suggestion.

people believe that rich people have earned their higher social status because they have certain natural talents, which seems ungrounded as well. To sum up, the state of affairs “living as equals” is non-instrumentally valuable, or to put it specifically, more valuable than the objectionable social hierarchies. I call this account the Non-Instrumental Value Account because it claims that the ideal of “living as equals” as a kind of state of affairs itself *constitutes* good consequences, i.e., equal social relationships constitute healthy, truthful, and fraternal social relationships that we value. In contrast, the Instrumental Value Account asserts that the ideal of “living as equals” is desirable because it *causes* certain good consequences such as social welfare and personal virtues (and their distributions).

Rather than *only* focusing on the problematic social hierarchies, the Non-Instrumental Value account explains the goodness of equal social relationships, and thus shows why it is better to have them, which is the positive proposal of relational egalitarianism. Relational egalitarianism is widely seen as a relational theory of justice, which asserts a distinctively different perspective from distributive egalitarianism. And this relational perspective means that relational egalitarians focus on social relations rather than certain distributive patterns of social goods in justice. To avoid the problems with the Instrumental Value Account, i.e., collapsing into distributive egalitarianism or providing wrong reasons, a natural choice for relational egalitarians is to claim that social relations themselves are valuable and thus adopt the Non-Instrumental Value Account. In addition, the Non-Instrumental Value Account is reflected in public political discourse. For example, people like to say that we need egalitarian family relationships because they are “healthy.” We pursue certain egalitarian civic relationships in a community because they are “fraternal.” We disvalue certain social relationships involving lies (e.g., a couple cheating on each other) because they are “untruthful.”

As Lippert-Rasmussen points out, however, the Non-Instrumental Value Account seems to face an objection I call the “Pointlessness Objection:”<sup>41</sup>

Two Societies: There are two similarly developed societies in the world, which have the same levels of economic, political, and cultural development. They are seen as the models for relational egalitarians, as all the citizens in the two societies live as equals.

The only significant difference between the two societies is that Society A has a population of one million, while Society B has a population of ten million.

In *Two Societies*, the existence of more people in Society B seems to bring more equal social relationships (in an intuitive sense, we may think that more social relations exist among ten million persons than that among one million persons), i.e., there are more instances of “living as equals” in Society B than Society A. Therefore, according to the Non-Instrumental Value Account, B is better than A in terms of justice. However, it seems counter-intuitive to think that the state of affairs in Society B is better than Society A merely because there are more citizens in B. Or imagine that the population in Society A suddenly reaches a billion through some kind of a miracle. Other things equal, it seems counter-intuitive to think the state of affairs in Society A suddenly gets much better. The problem in *Two Societies* is analogous to the problem with utilitarianism, which aims to create as much happiness in the world as possible. The problem with utilitarianism, as Jan Narveson says, is that “[w]e are in favor of making people happy, but neutral about making happy people.”<sup>42</sup> To put it simply, it seems pointless to create more instances of “living as equals.”

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<sup>41</sup> Lippert-Rasmussen (2018, pp. 162-170) presents a series of objections to the Non-Instrumental Value Account in his eyes. I reconstruct these objections into one here, as I believe they are essentially the same kind of objection.

<sup>42</sup> See Narveson (p. 80).

As Anderson points out, our commonsense practical reasoning does not follow a consequence-based model. According to Anderson, consequentialism ascribes intrinsic value to states of affairs, while the rational attitude theory of value ascribes intrinsic value mainly to persons. In Anderson's example, although the instance of fulfilling one's commitment seems good, it seems absurd to make more commitments just so that more commitments are fulfilled. This is because the value of fulfilling commitments is to fulfill every commitment one has made.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, although the state of affairs "living as equals" itself seems good, it is absurd to create more social relations that are equal. This is because the value of "living as equals" seems to be becoming equals with real people in society rather than creating more equals. So, according to Anderson, we pursue what we usually view as good, such as integrity, honesty, and equality, by realizing them in a given context, rather than adopting a consequence-based model of accumulating the instances of them.

I summarize this objection as follows:

*Pointlessness Objection:* If we desire the ideal of "living as equals," *only* because the state of affairs of "living as equals" is non-instrumentally valuable, i.e., "living as equals" itself constitutes a kind of good consequences, then it leads to a conclusion—a situation is better merely because there are more instances of equal social relationships—which seems pointless.

An intuitive response to this objection, I suppose, is to say that the values of social relationships are not cumulative, e.g., the benefits of social relationships are marginally

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<sup>43</sup> See Anderson (1996, pp. 539-542).

diminishing when we have more relationships.<sup>44</sup> But this response does not really answer the objection: If the instances of “living as equals” are essentially good consequences, why would their values diminish? Furthermore, if we pursue “living as equals” merely because it is good for us, it seems to only provide *pro tanto* reasons for living as equals, as some may think it can be outweighed by more benefits of certain social hierarchies in some cases—this means that the account may fail to satisfy the Sufficiency Criterion.<sup>45</sup> For example, the state or some persons may play the role of “parents”—act against one’s will and interfere with one’s decision to protect one from being harmed or make one better off. It does not mean that paternalist policies are never justified—sometimes they can be justified, as relational egalitarians do not demand that people relate to one another always as equals anywhere. However, some may proceed to defend some problematic social hierarchies based on similar paternalist considerations as well, e.g., some may say an emperor or a “leader of people” is much smarter than anyone and will govern the country in a way that is best for everyone.<sup>46</sup> An interpretation of Rawls’ Difference Principle may show similar reasoning against the problematic social hierarchies. According to the Difference Principle, “[s]ocial and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are...to

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<sup>44</sup> Or one may say that there could be some non-maximizing version of the Non-Instrumental Value Account. For example, say that good parent-children relationships are non-instrumentally valuable. It seems not counterintuitive to say that an alternative world with more good parents and children is a better place in one aspect (e.g., parenting). In the meantime, people don’t have to be parents for the sake of the relational good of parenting. I think this example is still facing the Pointlessness Objection. After all, all things being equal, a world with more good parents and children is better than a world with fewer good parents and children in this framework. And following the consequentialist model, which implies we have obligations to pursue the best consequence, we would have the obligation to bring more good parents and children. But this seems counter-intuitive, what we care about is having good relationships between parents and children, rather than creating more people to bring more instances of good parent-children relationships. I thank one reviewer for this parent-children example.

<sup>45</sup> This objection is not fully persuasive, as the goodness of equal social relationships cannot be provided or replaced by other goods. But it does not mean we cannot compare them to other goods or weigh them against the costs in certain cases.

<sup>46</sup> Relational egalitarians usually believe that democratic institutions that demand political power to be shared are necessary for protecting and sustaining equal social relationships. For example, see Anderson (1999, 2009, 2012), Scheffler (2015), Schuppert (2015), Nath (2020), and Schemmel (2021).



the greatest expected benefit of the least advantaged.”<sup>47</sup> Some kinds of social hierarchies (arguably including paternalism) may be justified. But *problematic* social hierarchies cannot pass the test as they disadvantage the inferior groups even when they bring better consequences for all. In sum, the Non-Instrumental Value Account does not seem to be a satisfactory reason for pursuing relational egalitarianism.

Perhaps a weaker version of the Non-Instrumental Value Account is defensible:

*Weak Non-Instrumental Value Account:* the ideal of “living as equals” is desirable, because although the equal social relations do not have *positive* value, the unequal social relations are typically bad, i.e., the problematic social hierarchies themselves are bad.

The Weak Non-Instrumental Value Account repeats part of what we have discussed above, and focuses on the badness of the problematic social hierarchies. The difference is that it does not commit to the positive values of equal social relations, and thus avoids the risk of pursuing more (pointless) instances of “equal relations” in a consequence-based model. It only claims that the problematic social hierarchies have negative values—in this sense I call this account “weak.” It cannot avoid all the shortcomings in the Non-Instrumental Value Account, e.g., the costs of social hierarchies can be outweighed by more benefits and thus we do not have a stable reason for pursuing relational egalitarianism here. But it can still play an important role when justifying relational egalitarianism. In this sense, the Weak Non-Instrumental Value Account could still provide some good reasons for relational egalitarianism.

That said, a better foundation for pursuing the ideal of “living as equals” does not focus on the good consequences it constitutes or causes, as I argue below.

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<sup>47</sup> Rawls (1999, p. 72).

### 3.3 The Non-Consequentialist Account

The Non-Consequentialist Account, in contrast to the former two accounts, asserts that the ideal of living as equals is desirable because it is required as a non-consequentialist norm. This account does not hold a consequence-based perspective or treats “living as equals” as a desirable state of affairs. Instead, it views the ideal of “living as equals” fundamentally as a *moral rule*. One example of the moral rule is keeping one’s promise: it is commonly held that we ought to keep our promises, as breaking one’s promise is thought to show disrespect for others, which may be implied by a Kantian formula, i.e., seeing everyone as ends instead of merely as means. In the cases of moral rule, we usually do not focus on the calculations of the consequences.<sup>48</sup> We see “living as equals” as inherently desirable or morally required in this way.<sup>49</sup> But we do not have to be a Kantian to accept the ideal of living as equals, as intuitively we are required to respect everyone.<sup>50</sup> It seems we ought to respect everyone’s dignity and standing without considering the differences in one’s social identities, roles, acts, or anything else. For example, Gideon Elford says, “[w]here persons are not respected or treated as equals, there is an affront to their equal status that is not simply to be folded into the overall level of wellbeing persons enjoy.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> This is only an example of understanding the Non-Consequentialist Account. I do not call it the Deontic Account, because I believe that this account could be compatible with not only deontology which claims we ought to act according to certain moral rules but also virtue ethics that claims we ought to act according to what a virtuous or perfect person would do. Some rule-consequentialist theories that focus on the consequences of certain rules rather than particular actions may accept it as well.

<sup>49</sup> The view focused on the non-consequentialist account is discussed at least by (but not only by) Anderson (2008), O’Neill (2008), Elford (2017), and Schemmel (2021).

<sup>50</sup> I use “respect” in the sense of recognition respect. Stephen Darwall (1977) famously distinguishes two kinds of respect: recognition respect consists in giving appropriate consideration or recognition to some feature of a person, while appraisal respect consists in a positive appraisal of a person (or one’s certain features).

<sup>51</sup> Elford (2017, p. 86). O’Neill (2008, pp. 130-131) also says, “States of affairs in which individual self-worth and fraternal social relations are undermined by domination and stigmatizing differences in status are, we might say, offensive to the dignity and standing of human agents...Non-Intrinsic egalitarianism can in a sense be seen as a deontic view...This latter claim receives some support if our ultimate explanation of the value of egalitarian social

The moral rule of “living as equals” could be founded on different non-consequentialist theories. One may see it as a Rossian moral duty. According to W.D. Ross, there are some basic and particular moral principles that cannot be explained on a more fundamental level. It means we are obliged to follow the rule, although the obligation may be outweighed by other considerations. For example, we have the duty of fidelity, but it seems fully permissible for us to break our promise in certain cases, e.g., breaking our promise of attending classes is not bad when the snowstorm comes. Ross calls them *prima facie* duties.<sup>52</sup> So, a Rossian theorist could assert that it is a *prima facie* duty to live as equals. Social contract theorists may view the rule of “living as equals” as a principle that people in a suitably designed social contract would accept or cannot reasonably reject.<sup>53</sup> Virtue theorists, on the other hand, may understand the rule of “living as equals” as a principle that a virtuous or perfect person would follow. I do not assert a specific account for the Non-Consequentialist Account in this paper. Rather, I only claim that this account views the ideal of “living as equals” as a fundamental moral rule without referencing a consequence-based model.

So, relational egalitarians who hold this view commit to the following:

*Non-Consequentialist Account:* The ideal of “living as equals” is morally required, i.e., we *ought* to live as equals, or we ought not to relate to one another in certain (unequal) ways.<sup>54</sup>

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relations, or of the disvalue of status-harms, relations of servility, or forms of domination, appeals to what individuals might be owed by virtue of respecting the dignity of human agents.”

<sup>52</sup> See Ross (1930).

<sup>53</sup> For some social contract theories, see Rawls (1999) and Gauthier (1986). According to Anderson (2010a, p. 3), relational egalitarians are essentially social contract theorists.

<sup>54</sup> Again, although I call it the Non-Consequentialist Account, some (rule-)consequentialists may accept this view without difficulties. And this is because people may endorse different definitions of consequentialism. For example, people who pursue the maximization of certain good things cannot accept Non-Consequentialist Account, while

This account, i.e., seeing the ideal of living as equals as morally required, is important for relational egalitarians. On the one hand, it seems to ground relational egalitarianism at a more fundamental level than distributive egalitarianism, as relational egalitarians pursue their ideal not in order to achieve a better distributive pattern. On the other hand, relational egalitarianism avoids the Pointlessness Objection, as it does not pursue as many instances of equal relations as possible. As Anderson says, “Egalitarians should regard them (inegalitarian social relations) as inherently objectionable, and take their eradication as a fundamental end, to which redistributive policies are largely instrumental. We should thus reconceive the ultimate egalitarian aim in relational rather than distributive terms: it is to constructing a society in which persons relate to one another as social equals.”<sup>55</sup> If so, it seems the Non-Consequentialist Account shows that we ought to pursue the ideal of living as equals for some appropriate motivations and sufficient reasons, which distinguishes relational egalitarianism from distributive egalitarianism. It will work even better when we combine it and the former two accounts into a full account for endorsing the ideal of living as equals.

#### 4. A Dilemma for the Non-Consequentialist Account

According to the Practice Criterion, to be a good account of the desirability of the ideal of living as equals, the Non-Consequentialist Account is supposed to show that relational egalitarianism provides some practical and determinate (in a broad sense) directions for us in

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those holding a broader conception of the goodness of the outcome that occurs may accept it. For a survey on the definition of consequentialism, see Horta, O’Brien, & Teran (2022).

<sup>55</sup> Anderson (2012, pp. 158-159).

social life. But for the critics of relational egalitarianism such as Arneson and Lippert-Rasmussen, the Non-Consequentialist Account faces a dilemma here:<sup>56</sup>

*Practice Dilemma* for the Non-Consequentialist Account:

Premise 1: Either the ideal of “living as equals” is a general and abstract moral requirement, or it is not.

Premise 2: If the ideal of “living as equals” is a general and abstract moral requirement, then it cannot provide a determinate answer to problems in social life given people’s disagreements, and thus fails to satisfy the Practice Criterion.

Premise 3: If the ideal “living as equals” is not a general and abstract moral requirement but a principle that implies a determinate answer to problems in social life, then it loses the intuitive appeal of being a general and abstract moral requirement, as usually, people (reasonably) disagree on problems in social life.

Conclusion: Therefore, the Non-Consequentialist Account either fails to satisfy the Practice Criterion, or loses the intuitive appeal for being a general and abstract moral requirement.

Let me explain this dilemma simply. Premise 1 seems tautological. Premise 2 says that merely a general and abstract moral requirement of “living as equals” does not imply substantial and specific solutions to problems in social life. As we can imagine, people may have different

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<sup>56</sup> See Arneson (2010) and Lippert-Rasmussen (2018, p. 173). Also see Litalien (2021, pp. 83-84), who thinks this problem is about how the claim of “being social equals” is entailed by the requirement of “being moral equals.” Different from the Instrumental Value Account and the Non-Instrumental Value Account, which may appeal to the weight and the calculation of values, the Non-Consequentialist Account only rests on the moral requirement of living as equals. People who disagree on concrete social problems may appeal to the same relational egalitarian principle to support their own views, e.g., some believe that Affirmative Action is needed to correct the existence of inequalities across different races while others think AA itself does not treat people as equals.

interpretations of this ideal of “living as equals”—even non-egalitarians such as Robert Nozick may think “(all) individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them” is implied and thus supported by the ideal of living as equals.<sup>57</sup> Even if we do not adopt such a broad interpretation, the requirement for equal respect for everyone does not seem to provide specific solutions. For example, people may have different interpretations of “living as equals”—some think it only requires certain basic social welfare policies, while others argue it supports stronger egalitarian policies such as affirmative action. In this sense, relational egalitarianism seems unable to provide proper guidance. As a theory of justice, however, relational egalitarianism should provide a guide. Premise 3 says, on the contrary, a substantial principle of “living as equals” that can provide determinate and specific directions for social problems is hard to be seen as a general and abstract moral requirement that can be widely accepted. If the ideal of “living as equals” is a thicker principle and implies a whole system of norms, including e.g., the “one person, one vote” rule, universal basic income, affirmative action, and other egalitarian claims, then the ideal will become less plausible. This is because people (reasonably) disagree on those problems in social life. For example, some support universal basic income because it provides a safety net for a person’s basic needs, while others argue that it may hurt economic development. If we must accept certain policies by endorsing relational egalitarianism, the relational egalitarian ideal becomes more controversial. This thicker ideal of “living as equals” is not an intuitive requirement anymore.<sup>58</sup> In sum, there is a tension between the ideal of “living as

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<sup>57</sup> Nozick (1974, ix).

<sup>58</sup> As Lippert-Rasmussen (2018, p. 137) argues, “the more specific we make the norm, e.g., if we make claims such as treating people as equals implies the ‘one person, one vote’ principle, the less plausible...relational egalitarianism is.”

equals” as a moral requirement and the ideal of “living as equals” as a practical theory of social justice.

## 5. Replies to the Practice Dilemma

The Practice Dilemma is a real problem for the Non-Consequentialist Account, but I do not think it poses a fatal objection to it. I will provide some replies to this dilemma in this section. First, relational egalitarians could deny that there is a special danger in accepting the dilemma, i.e., there are some tensions between the ideal of “living as equals” and its applications. It is not hard to bite the bullet here because this dilemma seems not a problem uniquely for relational egalitarianism. For example, Kantian ethics claims that we ought to follow the principle of humanity and never treat people merely as means rather than the end. But it is not easy to determine whether a specific action in ordinary life satisfies the principle of humanity. When luck egalitarianism asserts that everyone’s distributive shares ought to reflect nothing other than their comparative exercise of responsibility, it is hard to disagree with this assertion.<sup>59</sup> However, people could disagree on what social goods are the objects of distributive shares and doubt how to make judgments on people’s comparative exercise of responsibility, e.g., how to define and distinguish among different kinds of luck. Similar concerns apply to other theories of justice as well.

If we attempt to provide more explanations for how the Non-Consequentialist Account could avoid the Practice Dilemma, however, it seems that we have to construct the connection between the general and abstract requirement of “living as equals” and the substantial solutions to problems in social life. Relational egalitarians typically call for some strong and distinct

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<sup>59</sup> For the discussions on luck egalitarianism, see Arneson (2000, 2001), and Knight (2013). For some disagreements on two different kinds of luck, see Knight (2021).

egalitarian claims on their understanding of the ideal of “living as equals.” In other words, many relational egalitarians believe that the requirement of “living as equals” is not just an abstract one—it implies substantial and even radical directions for practical life. For example, relational egalitarians are especially opposed to certain stigmas such as racial and sexual discrimination. As Rekha Nath observes,

... Emily McTernan (2018) appeals to relational egalitarianism to explain why microaggressions might be unjust. And in building the case that disabled persons are subject to an unjust relational inequality, Jeffrey Brown (2019) engages with psychological and sociological findings on how stigmatizing representations of disability are consciously and subconsciously accepted by non-disabled persons as well as internalized by disabled persons with the consequence of producing pervasive disadvantage for the latter... More generally, relational egalitarianism can be seen as connected to a diverse body of contemporary writings on group-based inequality and oppression rooted in the feminist tradition (e.g., Barnes, 2016; Cudd, 2006; Fricker, 2007; Haslanger, 2012; Manne, 2018).<sup>60</sup>

Although these specific claims are not uncontroversial, it seems we can agree with Nath that relational egalitarians provide substantive and determinate claims in many issues based on the understanding of “living as equals.” As Anderson says, “The work of egalitarianism is never done because social hierarchy is resourceful: it always has new ways of reconstituting itself. New agenda items have to be developed in response to this.”<sup>61</sup> So, for relational egalitarians, it seems the egalitarian solutions to problems in social life depend on what the specific kind of

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<sup>60</sup> Nath (2020, p. 8).

<sup>61</sup> Anderson (2014, p. 261).



“social hierarchy” in a given context is. In this sense, the ideal of “living as equals” does provide very specific and substantial directions.

I believe that the substantial relational egalitarian theory could be grounded on a general and abstract moral requirement of “living as equals,” if we understand the requirement in a procedural sense following Scheffler. Scheffler puts forward a so-called “egalitarian deliberative constraint” for egalitarian decision-making: in an egalitarian relationship, people are disposed to treat one another’s interests as significantly as theirs.<sup>62</sup> As a device for egalitarian decision-making, the egalitarian deliberative constraint also distinguishes between procedural justice and substantial justice in terms of the ideal of living as equals. Scheffler argues that the deliberative constraint works for a society of equals:

In such a society, each member accepts that every other member’s equally important interests should play an equally significant role in influencing decisions made on behalf of society as a whole. Moreover, each member has a normally effective disposition to treat the interests of others accordingly. So a society of equals is characterized by a reciprocal commitment on the part of each member to treat the equally important interests of every other member as exerting equal influence on social decisions.<sup>63</sup>

Given the “deliberative constraints,” different from distributive egalitarians, relational egalitarians could provide more nuanced solutions to social problems (including distribution problems), as the procedural understanding of the ideal of “living as equals” provides more possibilities for us. For example, we may understand the ideal of “living as equals” as the

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<sup>62</sup> Scheffler (2015, p. 25).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 35-36.

fundamental principle of justice, and then apply it through a series of stages.<sup>64</sup> People may agree on certain egalitarian decision-making procedures first, and then draft basic principles and constitutions with this procedure. After that, certain political bodies decide on concrete laws and policies that reflect the principles and constitution, and finally enforce the law and policies. In this sense, we could understand the requirement of “living as equals” fundamentally a rule that calls for an egalitarian decision-making procedure. In different contexts with different social hierarchies, relational egalitarianism provides different replies that can be grounded on the fundamental moral requirement.

Now to reply to the Practice Dilemma, seeing the relational egalitarian ideal as a general and abstract moral requirement does not necessarily fail to provide specific and determinate solutions in social life. By understanding the requirement of “living as equals” in the procedural sense, we could guarantee that the outcome of the egalitarian decision-making procedure reflects the ideal of “living as equals,” and is thus required by the ideal as well. Determinate directions could be provided in the process. This is also similar to Kantian ethics, which could provide more specific norms in the discussions of how to understand the principle of humanity in particular circumstances. Given this, it seems relational egalitarianism achieves both the intuitive appeal and some determinate directions in social life, and thus avoids the dilemma.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> We may understand it as Rawls’ four-stage sequence in applying the conception of justice as fairness. See Rawls (1999, pp. 171-176).

<sup>65</sup> If other theories also follow this way, it may show that relational egalitarianism could be potentially compatible with other theories of justice—after all, it is based on the egalitarian deliberative constraint. Besides, as what I attempt to do here is to reply to the Practice Dilemma for the Non-Consequentialist Account, it would be enough to show that relational egalitarianism could do well with the Non-Consequentialist Account.

Although I do not assert a strong position here, I think the Practice Dilemma itself cannot directly refute the Non-Consequentialist Account for the desirability of “living as equals,” as relational egalitarians have theoretical resources to deal with the difficulties.

## 6. A Pluralist Account

Above I argue that the Non-Consequentialist Account of pursuing relational egalitarianism is the best one—it not only clearly distinguishes relational egalitarianism from distributive egalitarianism, but also shows that we have appropriate motivations and sufficient reasons to pursue the ideal of living as equals. That said, some theorists such as Kristin Voigt believe that relational egalitarianism is justified by various reasons, which could be compatible with one another.<sup>66</sup> This is a pluralist account for pursuing relational egalitarianism, which I think works better for relational egalitarians. We may believe that a society is just only if people live as equals, because it not only is a non-consequentialist moral requirement, but also involves better social relationships and makes people live better. In other words, we may pursue the ideal of living as equals for various reasons, including the instrumental, the non-instrumental, and the non-consequentialist ones. A pluralist account of pursuing relational egalitarianism may be as follows:

*Pluralist Account:* The ideal of “living as equals” is desirable, because (1) we *ought* to live as equals, (2) the problematic social hierarchies themselves are typically *bad*, and (3) equal social relations typically bring *good* consequences for individuals.

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<sup>66</sup> For example, see Voigt (2020).

The pluralist account has some advantages. Above all, with more different perspectives, relational egalitarianism becomes more attractive. It seems to make relational egalitarianism more plausible, and we have stronger reasons to be a relational egalitarian. Second, the different accounts *themselves* are not incompatible with one another. That is, we could believe that we ought to live as equals and that it would bring us better outcomes. Of course, it does not mean that different concerns must be in harmony. For example, the requirement of treating one another with equal respect, which is usually implied in the Non-Consequentialist Account and the Non-Instrumental Value Account, may not be easily supported by some versions of the Instrumental Value Account based on welfare. After all, the benefit of treating one another with equal respect may not be always explicit at the overall level of social welfare from an impartial viewpoint. Finally, a pluralist account could provide a certain consensus for problems in social life. Given the disagreements in ethics, probably different theorists prefer different reasons or attribute different weights to those reasons, a pluralist account for relational egalitarianism may avoid some difficulties at more fundamental levels and thus provides a basic consensus among relational egalitarians.

On the other hand, as I argue above, if a relational egalitarian does not fundamentally accept the Non-Consequentialist Account, e.g., when one only believes that (2) the problematic social hierarchies themselves are typically bad, and (3) equal social relations typically bring good consequences for individuals, it will have some risks. That is, it may face problems such as the Wrong Reason Objection and the Pointlessness Objection. So, I believe the Non-Consequentialist Account is necessary for a good pluralist account of pursuing relational egalitarianism. To see this, consider an analogy of buying a coat in the clothing store when winter is coming. Assume that two children beg their parents to buy coats for them, one of whom

wants the coat because the coat is blue—her favorite color—and the other wants the coat because of the style. In some sense, buying the coat for its color is a kind of the Instrumental Value Account, because for the child the coat seems to be a means to getting one blue thing. And buying the coat for its style sounds like the Non-Instrumental Value Account, because for the child the coat is great because its style is great. Though their reasons are not unacceptable, the parents probably will say something like “why not buy a blue jacket if you just want blue clothes” and “it looks beautiful, but the point is to make sure the coat keeps you warm.” The parents’ worries are similar to the Wrong Reason Objection and the Pointlessness Objection above. Here the parents fundamentally care about warmth when buying coats for their children, though they do not reject their children’s favorite colors or styles.

Note that when I argue that the Non-Consequentialist Account is the necessary and fundamental one, we may endorse the ideal of living as equals for different sets of reasons as long as they include the Non-Consequentialist Account. For example, if one does not think relational egalitarianism brings better consequences than distributive egalitarianism (and thus rejecting the Instrumental Value Account), one could still have good reasons to be a relational egalitarian (e.g., by accepting the Non-Consequentialist Account *and* believing the problematic social hierarchies themselves are typically bad). Alternatively, one may just accept the Non-Consequentialist Account and believe that equal social relations bring better social welfare and other good consequences for individuals as a desirable side-effect. Or one can pursue the ideal of living as equals only for a non-consequentialist reason. But merely the Instrumental Value Account and the Non-Instrumental Value Account cannot do that. So, in the end, it might be better to call my account the “Non-Consequentialist Pluralist Account,” as the non-consequentialist part is the fundamental one.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I examine three main accounts of pursuing relational egalitarianism—the Instrumental Value Account, the Non-Instrumental Value Account, and the Non-Consequentialist Account. The Instrumental Value Account claims that “living as equals” is instrumentally valuable because it is the means to social welfare or other good consequences such as developing persons’ moral capacity. The Non-Instrumental Value Account claims that the state of affairs of “living as equals,” i.e., equal social relations and certain structures based on the equal relations constitutes good consequences. The Non-Consequentialist Account claims that people ought to live as equals without focusing on the good consequences. Both the Instrumental Value Account and the Non-Instrumental Value Account show that relational egalitarianism is appealing, but they either miss the point of “living as equals” or provide weak support. I argue the Non-Consequentialist Account provides the fundamental and strongest reason for relational egalitarianism.

However, the Non-Consequentialist Account may face a dilemma: the more persuasive as a moral requirement the ideal of “living as equals” is, the weaker influence on the specific social problems it will lead to, as it seems a general and abstract moral requirement does not tell us the determinate answer in life; the stronger influence on the specific social problems the ideal of “living as equals” leads to, the less persuasive as a moral requirement the ideal of “living as equals” is, as it seems the reasonable disagreements we have in life make the moral requirement doubtful. To reply, I argue that this dilemma is not fatal. First, all practical theories may face similar dilemmas when applied in real life. Second, relational egalitarianism does have resources to support determinate and specific claims and stay intuitively appealing in the meantime. People

who do not accept the Non-Consequentialist Account can still be relational egalitarians.

However, their justification for their view seems inadequate, as I argue that non-consequentialist thinking is fundamental for relational egalitarianism. A pluralist account may be the best, but it must include the Non-Consequentialist Account.

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Michael Weber and Kevin Vallier for their helpful feedback, and I also thank two reviewers from this journal for their insightful comments.

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