

Particularist Relational Egalitarianism and Intergenerational Justice

Xihe Ouyang

Department of Philosophy, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB, Canada

Email: xihe.ouyang@ucalgary.ca

1. Introduction

Relational egalitarians claim that justice is about promoting equal relationships among members of society, emphasizing equal respect, equal concern, and opposition to oppression, domination, and manipulation. (Anderson 1999; Scanlon 2002; Scheffler 2003, 2005). Although this view has gained increasing prominence in recent years, it has also faced significant criticism. One such critique, put forward by Jonathan Quong (2018) and Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (2018), holds that relational egalitarianism has a problem of addressing intergenerational justice. Their argument can be put in the following way.

- 1) There are justice and injustice between non-overlapping generations.
- 2) However, there are no social relations between members of non-overlapping generations.
- 3) Relational egalitarianism focuses on social relations only.
- 4) Given 2) and 3), relational egalitarianism appears to have little or nothing to offer on the issue of intergenerational justice involving non-overlapping generations.
- 5) However, given 1), 4) indicates a prima facie problem for relational egalitarianism.

Premise (1) is widely accepted. As for Premise (2), it is agreed by many that social relations require interactions, cooperation, and even communication. In other words, people must “live together” to have social relations. If so, Lippert-Rasmussen argues, there can be no social relations between members of non-overlapping generations because they do not interact, cooperate, or communicate. Lippert-Rasmussen endorses premise (3) on the grounds that primary defenders of relational egalitarianism hold it and rejecting it would

undermine much of what relational egalitarians claim. Furthermore, Premise (4) follows from (2) and (3), and Conclusion (5) follows from (1) and (4).

In this paper, I will challenge this argument. In the first part of the paper, I will provide *prima facie* cases against premise (4), arguing relational egalitarianism can indeed offer valuable insights into intergenerational justice. In section 2, I argue that by emphasizing equal respect, relational egalitarianism sheds light on cases where the core concerns involve manipulation, discrimination, and domination across generations. In section 3, I argue that by providing a compelling account of intragenerational justice in other generations, relational egalitarianism can further illuminate our obligations to future and past generations.

However, if premise (4) is wrong, then either premise (2) or premise (3) (or both) must be mistaken, since premise (4) follows from their combination. In the second part of this paper (Section 4), I will introduce a strategy to challenge premises (3), according to which relational egalitarianism can and maybe should take a particularist form.

2. Our Duty to Respect Other Generations

In this section and the next, I will provide *prima facie* plausible cases illustrating how relational egalitarianism can offer valuable insights into intergenerational justice. In this section, I argue that by emphasizing equal respect, relational egalitarianism is best suited to address cases where the core concerns involve respect, non-manipulation, non-discrimination, and non-domination across generations.

What I take to be the most significant contribution of relational egalitarianism is the idea that equality is not (merely) about equality of distribution, but, perhaps more importantly or ultimately, about equal concern and respect. In this section, I will show that

relational egalitarianism and its ideal of equal respect can offer important intrinsically-equality-based insights concerning both future and past generations.

Equal respect can mean many things. For example, Anderson (1999) points out that envy is not a way to respect one another as equals. In this section, I will focus on the following aspect of equal respect: we should regard other people's will and choice as equally worthy of respect as ours, as long as they have equal agent moral status. An example of this is that we should regard other people's votes to be as important as ours and respect the outcomes of a legitimate electoral process.

Now, let us explore how this understanding of equal respect can be applied to relations with future generations. Consider the following case.

AI Model: Suppose our generation is developing a powerful AI system that will significantly impact future generations in nearly every aspect of life. One potential model has the following features, which we are fully aware of. It is exceptionally powerful and intelligent, capable of greatly enhancing future productivity and enabling future people to enjoy a materially prosperous life. However, it is also firmly committed to one particular conception of the good life, as endorsed by its current developer. This commitment leads the AI model to subtly manipulate future people — via education and media — into adopting this particular way of life, without their awareness of the manipulation. Furthermore, it is foreseeable that once this AI system is introduced and accepted by society, it will secure its own importance and exert increasing influence as time progresses.

In this case, if our generation were to choose to create and accept this AI model, we would be committing an injustice against future generations. More importantly, this injustice is best understood through the lens of relational egalitarianism, which highlights our failure to grant the future generation equal respect. We fail to recognize and respect future people as beings who have equal moral agent status as we do and have an equal right to determine how to live their lives. Moreover, the fact that this AI model can enhance future productivity and enable

future people to enjoy a materially prosperous life does not mitigate the injustice of disrespect and manipulation. Just as providing someone with financial compensation does not justify manipulating them in everyday cases, material prosperity cannot neutralize the injustice of failing to respect future people as equals.

Moreover, neither distributive egalitarianism nor non-egalitarian values provide as compelling an account of the injustice in this case as relational egalitarianism does. Distributive egalitarianism, when applied to future generations, suggests that future people should have a similar number of resources or equal opportunity for well-being as we do. In this case, it is not clear that embracing the AI model violates the requirement of justice offered by distributive egalitarianism. Recall that the AI model will enhance future productivity and enable future people to lead materially prosperous lives, which will give them equal or greater resources or opportunities for well-being than we do. So, distributive egalitarians may reach a counterintuitive conclusion: there is no injustice in embracing the AI model. Furthermore, even if distributive egalitarians can find an indirect way to explain the injustice —perhaps by appealing to the unfair distribution of some artificially created respect-related distributanda (e.g., "respect points" assigned to individuals)—its account would fall short. The best explanation or the core issue here, ultimately, is manipulation or disrespect rather than the distribution of something like respect points.

Non-egalitarian values cannot fully explain the injustice in this case either. One may argue that respect and non-manipulation are relational but not necessarily egalitarian values. However, how much respect should we give to future generations? It cannot be the same degree of respect we give to a 7-year-old's choice, though a child's choice still deserves

some degree of respect. We should respect future people just as we respect our peers. Similarly, the badness of the manipulation in this case cannot be fully explained without appealing to the equal moral status of future people and the equal respect they are owed. In sum, the idea of equal respect and non-manipulation, as articulated by relational egalitarianism, provides the best explanation for the injustice in the AI model scenario¹.

Now, let us turn to another case concerning past generations.

Ancient Greek Scientist: Imagine a historical figure named “AA,” a great scientist who lived around 300 BC in an ancient Greek society. He spent almost all his time on scientific research and made many great discoveries. However, like most Greek citizens of his time, he did not find the practice of slavery wrong because it is supported not only by a long-lasting tradition but also by philosophers, like Aristotle. As a result, he bought two slaves to help him build machines for scientific endeavors.

Is it appropriate to honor AA and his achievements by building a statue of him or regarding him as one of the great figures in history? I believe the common-sense answer to this question is yes. But what about the fact that he was a slave-owner? Doesn’t that make him a bad person, and shouldn’t it determine his historical status? The common-sense answer here is no since we should not judge him by today’s standards. A plausible interpretation of this idea is that while AA’s action of buying and owning slaves is objectively wrong, he, as a

¹ We can modify this case of AI slightly to introduce a case involving domination. Keeping all other aspects of the case unchanged, we replace “manipulating future generations towards a particular way of life” with “degrading them, instilling the belief that they are significantly inferior to their ancestors and that they must prioritize and devote substantial time and energy to fulfilling their ancestors’ wishes over their own.” For this case, by conducting a similar analysis, we arrive at a similar conclusion: relational egalitarianism, with its idea of equal respect, is the best candidate for explaining the injustice involved. This case can also be further modified to become a scenario where past generations sought to dominate us in a similar manner, degrading us by fostering the belief that we are markedly inferior to them and compelling us to prioritize their wishes over our own. It seems that in this case, our duty of justice is to liberate ourselves from the control of our ancestors once we realize such control exists. Although this case concerns our generation and past generations, rather than our generations and future generations, we would reach a similar conclusion, i.e., relational egalitarianism and its ideal of equal respect are the best explanation of the relevant injustice.

person, is not blameworthy. Because, like most of us, he was an imperfect moral agent. If it is not blameworthy for us to hold views that are widely accepted by society and endorsed by leading thinkers of our time, then it would also not be blameworthy for AA to embrace the views supported by the majority and the leading thinkers of his era. To blame him or others in similar circumstances would constitute an injustice.

However, if we slightly modify the case, things will be different. Suppose AA was not only a slave-owner but also a traitor in war. In this case, while we may still respect his scientific achievement, we should not honor him as a person. Unlike slave ownership, which was normalized in his society, betrayal during war were considered morally wrong even in his time. As a moral agent like us, AA should have recognized and avoided such actions. So, he is blameworthy and should be regarded as morally corrupt for his misconduct.

Again, relational egalitarianism and the idea of equal respect provide the best explanation for this case. Like how we treat and respect the co-citizens in our time, we do not blame people who believe in the beliefs that are widely accepted in their society, but we do hold them accountable for actions that were both objectively wrong and recognized as wrong in their time. We respect them as equal moral agents like us, no more, no less. For similar reasons I provided earlier, distributive egalitarianism and non-egalitarian values cannot provide an equally good explanation. On one hand, the issue at stake is about respect or blame, not distribution, even the distribution of respect or blame-related distributanda. On the other hand, the injustice in this kind of case can only be fully understood by appealing to equality, specifically, equal moral agency. For if one were a much better moral agent than we are, it might be just to blame them for being a slave owner because we could reasonably

expect such an individual to discern the flaws in the widely held beliefs of their society. If one were a much worse moral agent than we are, it might be unjust to blame them for being a traitor in war because they may not have good idea of the moral aspect of this action.

To sum up, relational egalitarianism and its ideal of equal respect provide the most plausible explanation of the cases discussed above. In the absence of counterarguments, it is reasonable to speculate that relational egalitarianism and its emphasis on equal respect could also provide valuable insights into other cases where the core concerns involve respect, non-manipulation, non-discrimination, and non-domination across generations. Moreover, this is not the only way in which relational egalitarianism can provide valuable insights into intergenerational justice. In the next section, I will explore another one.

3. Intragenerational Injustice and Duties to Other Generations

A generation's duties of justice toward other generations are partly shaped by the intragenerational injustice within those other generations.

We have duties of justice to avoid fostering intragenerational inequality among those yet to come. For example, we should avoid creating an AI system that is likely to lead to a scenario in which a small group of people dominate the majority in the future. Obviously, this line of reasoning is not limited to AI systems; it applies to policies or technologies with similar effects. For example, as Schmidt (2024) points out, when evaluating climate policies, we must pay attention to whether they disproportionately harm vulnerable groups in the future.

In short, the consideration of intragenerational inequality among future generations partly determines what earlier generations should do. Additionally, relational egalitarians would say that their framework provides the best tool to understand intragenerational

inequality. If this is the case, then we reach this: relational egalitarianism offers the best framework for understanding future intragenerational inequalities and this understanding partially informs the duties that preceding generations have toward future generations.

A similar argument applies to our duties of justice toward past generations. Such duties are largely shaped by past intragenerational justice. As Stemplowska (2022) argued, we have duties to mitigate injustice done in the past. One way of doing that is publicly commemorating the victims of past injustices. Moreover, as relational egalitarians would argue, past intragenerational injustice is best understood in relational terms, e.g., slavery is fundamentally about domination, discrimination, and unequal political and civil rights, rather than merely unfair distributions. Again, relational egalitarianism offers the best framework for understanding past intragenerational inequalities, and this understanding, in turn, informs our duties of justice toward past generations.

To sum up, by providing the best explanation of intragenerational justice, relational egalitarianism offers another way to shed light on duties towards other generations.

4. Relational Egalitarianism and Social Relations

In the last two sections, by providing two general ways in which relational egalitarianism can offer important useful insights on intergenerational justice, I have aimed to show that premise 4) of Quong and Lippert-Rasmussen's argument — relational egalitarianism has little to offer on the issue of intergenerational justice involving non-overlapping generations — is wrong. However, premise (4) is derived from premise (2)—that there are no social relations between members of non-overlapping generations—and premise (3)—that

relational egalitarianism focuses solely on social relations. Therefore, to comprehensively challenge premise (4), one must also address the validity of premise (2) and premise (3).

One way to approach this is by challenging premise (2). Recall that many assume that social relations require interaction or cooperation between the agents involved, making it hard to see how different non-overlapping generations could have social relations—thus, premise (2) is often accepted. However, Karnein (2022) argues that cooperation between non-overlapping generations is possible if three conditions are met: (1) People from different non-overlapping generations share a common goal (2) they are responsive to one another (3) both parties benefit from the interaction. She illustrates this with the case of building Gaudi's Church of the Holy Family. In this case, earlier and later builders share the same aim. Latter builders respond to earlier builders' plans, considerations, and instructions, and both groups benefit: later builders gain from the earlier guidance, while earlier builders have their aims realized through the efforts of those who follow. In this way, cooperation between non-overlapping generations becomes possible.

Cass (2025), on the other hand, offers a way to reject premise (3) by arguing that relational egalitarianism is not (solely) about social relations. According to his institutional approach, relational egalitarianism cares about equal civic status within an institution. Under this view, people from different generations may have equal or unequal civic statuses in a continuous institution. Arguably, in the case of the AI Model, one might suggest that there is a continuous institution and that the generation that created the AI model holds a higher status than later generations, thereby explaining the injustice in that scenario.

Both approaches allow us to apply relational egalitarianism to intergenerational cases. Given the space limit, I will not settle on whether these two approaches are plausible. Instead, I will assume they are. Now, the question becomes: Are these the best options that relational egalitarians can offer? To address this, consider this case.

Humanoids: In 2100, a nuclear war devastated humanity. Survivors, aware of their impending extinction, relied on advanced knowledge of civilization, evolution, and climate change, predicting that new humanoid beings would almost certainly emerge over millions of years. A group of extremist religious scientists used their remaining lives to design a device that activates upon detecting humanoids. This device would guide their development—teaching agriculture, writing, and tool-making, and even performing miracles—to ensure the beings revered it as a divine messenger. It would also implant the scientists' extreme religious beliefs, eliminating any dissent, so that modern science and freedom would never arise, until the humanoids eventually met their end.

In this case, again, relational egalitarianism should be the best theory for explaining the injustice because the main injustice is the extremist religious scientists dominating and manipulating the Humanoids by deciding how they should and will live their lives. However, there is neither cooperation nor a continuous institution present here. While this case may not conclusively invalidate the two approaches mentioned above, it does raise a reasonable question: is there a version of the relational egalitarian view that can also accommodate my intuition in this scenario? Here is a possible option.

Particularist relational egalitarianism: a relation is unjust when there is an unequal relation that, given the nature of that relation, the moral status of the relevant parties, and the specific context, (1) ought to be equal in the corresponding way and (2) falls within the domain of justice. Whether (1) and (2) satisfied depends on our particular judgements.

Although leading relational egalitarians have not proposed this view², I find it intuitively appealing. The upshot is *if a given relation ought to be equal and falls within the*

² I do not regard this fact as an objection to particularist relational egalitarianism.

domain of justice, then why should relational egalitarianism not cover that? ³ More interestingly, when people argue for or against Quong and Lippert-Rasmussen's argument, they tend to be more confident in their judgments about individual cases than in their views on overarching principles. So why not start with our particular judgments?

Three remarks here. First, embracing particularism does not entail that we would entirely rely on bare intuitions. We can have particular analysis, justification, explanation, and so on. For example, when asked why humanoids are treated unjustly, our answer would not simply be our intuition told us so. It will be more well-grounded, which may include the fact that humanoids, like us, have a certain level of capacity for agency and have the right to choose their own way of life. Such a right demands respect, meaning they should not be manipulated and dominated by the extremist religious scientists. In this way, particularist relational egalitarianism offers a good explanation for cases like Humanoids and others.

Second, the particularist view does not render earlier relational egalitarian theories meaningless. The core ideas of relational egalitarians remain highly relevant. First, it is still fundamentally a relational theory. Second, core ideas such as equal respect, equal concern, non-domination, non-manipulation, and non-discrimination continue to perform essential explanatory, justificatory, and prescriptive roles, as demonstrated in the case discussions throughout this paper. What particularists do not want is a one-size-fits-all principle that can 100% determine the truth and our judgment on every case. Instead, when evaluating

³ Whether all such relations belong to social relations depends on one's specific understanding of "social," but that question is not important anymore. Instead, what matters is whether the specific relationship at hand satisfied conditions (1) and (2). Particularist relational egalitarianism provides a plausible explanation for cases like Humanoids and AI Model, regardless of whether the relevant relations qualify as "social."

whether a case involves injustice, to what extent it is unjust, and in what respects it is unjust, particularists hold that we should both apply our understanding of these core relational egalitarian ideas and closely examine the specific nature of the relationship, the moral status of the involved parties, and the particular context of the case.

Third, I admit that particularist relational egalitarianism may also face the general problems that particularism or contextualism in other philosophical areas faces. I will not discuss them here. However, just as philosophers take particularism or contextualism seriously in moral philosophy and epistemology—even when many disagree—I maintained that particularist relational egalitarianism is not a non-starter, which deserves further consideration and should be brought about in this debate⁴.

5. Conclusion

I have argued relational egalitarianism is best suited to address cases where the core concerns involve respect, non-manipulation, non-discrimination, and non-domination across generations. I have also argued that by providing a plausible explanation for intragenerational justice, relational egalitarianism offers another indirect way to shed light on duties towards other generations. Moreover, I suggest relational egalitarians should at least consider embracing a particularist version of the view. However, one may suggest that even if I have shown that relational egalitarianism can shed light on intergenerational justice,

⁴ Particularist relational egalitarianism also avoids another problem that many versions of relational egalitarianism face, i.e., the pervasiveness problem. This problem highlights the fact that some unequal social relations, such as relations between teachers and students, are not unjust. Relational egalitarians need to provide a plausible framework to pick out just unequal social relations and explain why they are just, while others are not (Bengtson & Nielsen 2023). Particularist relational egalitarianism, given its particularist nature, does not have this problem. For example, the nature of the teacher-student relation does not require it to be an equal one to be just. So, it does not satisfy condition (1).

I have not shown that relational egalitarianism, even in its particularist form, is a complete theory of justice, since I have not shown how it applies to all the cases or aspects relevant to intergenerational justice. For example, I did not discuss what kind of distribution across generations that should be endorsed by relational egalitarianism.

My personal view is that relational egalitarianism is indeed incomplete, but I do not see it as a serious problem. On the one hand, if relational egalitarianism offers the best account for the kind of cases discussed in this paper, then it should be a component of any plausible theory of intergenerational justice. On the other hand, I agree with Lippert-Rasmussen's suggestion that egalitarianism should take a pluralist form which contains both distributive and relational components. If such a hybrid view is plausible in the context of intragenerational justice, why should we not also embrace a hybrid view for intergenerational justice? Relational Egalitarianism deals with the cases discussed in this paper, which involve respect, non-manipulation, non-discrimination, and non-domination across generations. A distributive theory that is compatible with relational egalitarianism deals with the distribution across generations. How about that?

Reference

- Anderson, E. (1999). What Is the Point of Equality? *Ethics* 109(2), 287–337
- Bengtson, Andreas & Nielsen, Lasse (2023). Relational Justice: Egalitarian and Sufficientarian. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 40 (5):900-918.
- Karnein, Anja. 2022. Rawls and the future: on the possibility of cooperation across time. *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 50(3): 271–300.
- Lippert-Rasmussen, Kasper. 2018. *Relational egalitarianism: Living as equals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Quong, Jonathan. 2018. Consequentialism, deontology, contractualism, and equality. In *The Oxford handbook of distributive justice*, ed. Serena Olsaretti. 306–326. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scanlon, T. M. (2003). The Diversity of Objections to Inequality, in T. M. Scanlon. *The Difficulty of Tolerance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scheffler, S. (2003a). What Is Egalitarianism? *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31 (1), 5–39.

—— (2005). Choice, Circumstance and the Value of Equality. *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 4(4), 5–28.

Schmidt, Andreas T. 2024. Egalitarianism across Generations. *Utilitas* 36 (3):242-264.

Sommers, Timothy. 2023. Can there be relational equality across generations? Or at all? *Res Publica* 29(3): 469–481.

Stemplowska, Zofia (2022). ‘Go Tell the Spartans, Passerby’: Whom to Remember Ahead of Whom? *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 39 (5):825-840.