

RELATIONAL EGALITARIANISM

Over the last twenty years, many political philosophers have rejected the idea that justice is fundamentally about distribution. Rather, justice is about social relations, and the so-called distributive paradigm should be replaced by a new relational paradigm. Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen seeks to describe, refine and assess these thoughts and to propose a comprehensive form of egalitarianism which includes central elements from both relational and distributive paradigms. He shows why many of the challenges which luck egalitarianism faces reappear, once we try to specify relational egalitarianism more fully. His discussion advances our understanding of the nature of the relational ideal and introduces new conceptual tools for understanding it and for exploring the important question of why it is desirable in the first place to relate as equals. Even severe critics of the distributive understanding of justice will find that this book casts important new light on the ideal to which they subscribe.

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Living As Equals

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For Cæcilie, Hannah, Kira, Mona, Samuel and William

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Preface

The main title of this book might seem slightly odd. Is not any idea about equality relational? After all, by definition equality is a relation that obtains between individuals when they have equal amounts of, say, resources. In a sense this is true. However, ‘relational equality’ refers to a particular kind of relations, namely egalitarian social relations; and this important addendum largely vindicates the title, since in much of the literature on justice, it is assumed that one can specify what justice, or at least distributive justice, requires without saying anything – or at any rate not that much – about *social* relations.

Over the last twenty years or so, many political philosophers have rejected this view, suggesting that, fundamentally, justice is all about social relations and that the so-called distributive paradigm, which was once dominant in political philosophy, should be replaced by a new relational paradigm. This book seeks to describe, refine and assess these thoughts. *Pace* the paradigm replacement view just described, I propose an ecumenical form of egalitarianism, which includes central elements from both relational and distributive paradigms. In the course of doing so, I show why the family of different relational views on justice is much larger than the present body of literature might lead one to think, and that many of the differences between different relational views mirror differences between different distributive views. Specifically, I will show why many of the challenges faced by luck egalitarianism reappear, *mutatis mutandis*, once we try to specify relational egalitarianism more fully. This suggests that the two strands of thinking about justice and equality are not that different at all and, in particular, that the differences – and I am not denying that there are important differences – are not so large that an ecumenical project of the sort this book engages in makes no sense. Last, but definitely not least, I also seek to advance our understanding of the relational ideal, for example by offering a broader view of the way in which it is embodied in our practice of giving and receiving blame and by introducing new conceptual

tools for understanding this view (and its many variations) and for exploring the important question of why it is desirable in the first place to relate as equals. Hence, I hope that even readers of a relational egalitarian persuasion who reject any ecumenical ambitions of the sort I pursue in the book will find that, nevertheless, it casts important new light on the ideal to which they subscribe.

I should like to acknowledge a deep academic debt to my former D.Phil. supervisor in connection with this book. When I worked with – or, perhaps more correctly, in academic respects at least, under – G. A. Cohen (an especially noteworthy fact, given the topic of this book), I did not see as clearly as I should have what a brilliant mind he was. At the time I did not work on equality, but on deontology (which is not to say that the two topics are unrelated). My interest in equality came later and I have always found Jerry's work on equality tremendously insightful and inspiring. With all due modesty, I would like to think of this book as one that brings together two broad lines of thought in Jerry's work about justice (and more generally in egalitarian political philosophy) which, to my knowledge, he never explicitly connected in any worked-out way: the idea of luck egalitarianism and distributive equality, on the one hand, and the idea of relating as equals, on the other. As we shall see, Jerry was very sympathetic to both ideas, despite the impression one might reasonably develop if one reads some of the contemporary relational egalitarian critiques of luck egalitarianism in general and critiques of Jerry's work in particular. Hence, I like to think of this book not only as one that reconciles two ways of thinking about egalitarian justice which, presently, are often thought of as incompatible, but also, and partly for more personal reasons, as a book that brings to fruition two lines of thought that were present in Jerry's work and which, due to his untimely death, he never put together – at least not at length and systematically.

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