

The Intergenerational Justice Dilemma for Relational Egalitarians

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ABSTRACT

Relational egalitarianism is a prominent theory of justice according to which justice requires equal relations. However, relational egalitarianism faces a central problem, i.e., the problem of intergenerational justice: the view is silent when it comes to relations between non-overlapping generations. In this paper, I want to explore whether relational egalitarians may escape the problem by adopting a different view of what it means to be relevantly related. I discuss four such views and argue that they all face two problems. Ultimately, this means that relational egalitarians end up in a dilemma: *Either* relational egalitarians adopt their standard lexical view of social relations, but in that case the theory does not speak to relations between non-overlapping generations (the problem of intergenerational justice); *or* they adopt a non-lexical understanding of (social) relations in which case the theory does speak to relations between non-overlapping generations, but then (a) it is not clear that the relations are thick enough to ground *relational*, as opposed to *distributive*, requirements of justice, and (b) even if the relations are thick enough to ground relational requirements, it is hard to see that they can justify *egalitarian*, as opposed to, say, *sufficientarian*, relational requirements.

KEYWORDS Relational egalitarianism; intergenerational justice; relational sufficientarianism; social relations

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Section 1 – Introduction

Relational egalitarianism is a theory of justice according to which justice requires equal relations.¹ By focusing on relations as that which ultimately matters for justice, the view convincingly explains why discrimination, racism, sexism and like phenomena are unjust. Such phenomena are unjust because they constitute inequalitarian relations between inferiors, such as the discriminatee, and superiors, such as the discriminator. It is fair to say, I think, that relational egalitarianism has become a widely accepted theory of justice.²

However, relational egalitarianism faces a central problem: *the problem of intergenerational justice*. The problem points out that relational egalitarianism entails, counterintuitively, that justice does not require

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anything in relations between non-overlapping generations since such relations do not fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, pp. 123-129). This means, for instance, that it is not unjust, according to relational egalitarianism, if contemporary people pollute to such an extent that future people will suffer from severe climate change. Few people, I take it, will agree with this.

Now, what lands relational egalitarians in the problem of intergenerational justice is a prominent view of what it means to be socially related. But there are other views of being relevantly related which relational egalitarians may adopt. Indeed, I point to four such views which relational egalitarians may adopt in response to the problem of intergenerational justice. I will argue that these different solutions, interestingly, fail for the same reason. In short, relational egalitarians end up in a *dilemma*: *Either* relational egalitarians adopt their standard lexical view of social relations, but in that case the theory does not speak to relations between non-overlapping generations (the problem of intergenerational justice); *or* they adopt a non-lexical understanding of (social) relations in which case the theory does speak to relations between non-overlapping generations, but then (a) it is not clear that the relations are thick enough to ground *relational*, as opposed to *distributive*, requirements of justice, and (b) even if the relations are thick enough to ground relational requirements, it is hard to see that they can justify *egalitarian*, as opposed to, say, *sufficientarian*, relational requirements.

Section 2 – Relational egalitarianism and the problem of intergenerational justice

Relational egalitarianism is a theory of justice according to which justice requires that people relate as equals, or at least that they do not relate as unequals.³ It emanated originally as a criticism of distributive theories of justice—theories according to which justice ultimately has to do with *distributions*.⁴ Distributive theorists of justice, relational egalitarians argue, fail to realize that justice is not ultimately about distributions. Indeed, distributions in a society may be just, distributive justice-wise, but the society may still fail to realize justice, e.g., because racism is prevalent in the society. What ultimately matters for justice is,

instead, *relations*. Relational egalitarian justice requires that people relate to each other as equals (see, e.g., Anderson, 1999; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018; Scheffler, 2005; 2015).⁵

For X and Y to relate as equals, relational egalitarians claim, they must (i) *regard* each other as equals; and (ii) *treat* each other as equals (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, p. 71; see also Cohen, 2013, p. 197; Fourie, 2012; Miller, 1998; Voigt, 2018).⁶ The former is an *attitudinal* component whereas the latter is a *behavioral* component. These may come apart. A rational racist may treat their co-worker as an equal for selfish reasons, e.g., because they would lose their job if they treated their co-worker in a racist manner. Although they treat their co-worker as an equal, they regard them as a moral inferior for which reason they do not relate as equals. Conversely, two people may regard one another as equals and fail to treat each other as equals, e.g., because two opportunistic workers of different racial backgrounds want to satisfy their racist employer (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, p. 72). This is, admittedly, a preliminary sketch of relational egalitarianism. But we will develop this preliminary sketch as we move along, and, moreover, this is all that is needed to introduce a central problem facing relational egalitarianism as a theory of justice.⁷

The central problem facing relational egalitarianism is what I will refer to as the *problem of intergenerational justice*. Lippert-Rasmussen presents the problem as follows:

- (1) Intergenerational justice pertains to justice between different generations whose lives do not overlap.
- (2) Different generations whose lives do not overlap do not have any social relations.
- (3) If relational egalitarianism provides a complete account of the requirements of justice, then justice does not pertain to relations between groups of persons who do not have any social relations.
- (4) However, justice pertains to the relations between different non-overlapping generations (i.e. intergenerational justice is at least a part of a complete account of the requirements of justice).

(5) Thus, relational egalitarianism does not provide a complete account of the requirements of justice (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, pp. 123-124; cp. Bidadanure, 2016; Quong, 2018, pp. 317-318).

In essence, the problem is that relational egalitarianism does not speak to relations between non-overlapping groups of people, i.e., it does not provide a plausible view of intergenerational justice since it says that justice does not require anything in such relations; it is simply silent. To see how Lippert-Rasmussen generates this problem for relational egalitarianism, we must start by noting that relational egalitarianism is a theory of justice which applies *only* to those who are relevantly socially related. If there is no relation to begin with, there is no relation that can be (in)egalitarian (Kolodny, 2014, p. 293). The scope of relational egalitarianism is bound in accordance with social relations, as it were. Lippert-Rasmussen, in accordance with many relational egalitarians, employs a definition of what it means to be socially related according to which “X and Y are socially related [if and] only if (i) X is socially related to Y and Y is socially related to X; and (ii) X can causally affect Y and Y can causally affect X”; (iii) X and Y can adjust their conduct in light of each other’s conduct and communicate (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, pp. 126, 128; see also Anderson, 1999, p. 313; Kolodny, 2014, p. 293; Nath, 2011; 2015; Schemmel, 2021, p. 294).⁸

This is a *lexical* definition of social relations: it seeks to capture what we mean when we say that two people are socially related. It entails, for instance, that if there are people on Venus, we, as Earthlings, are not socially related to Venusians since we cannot causally affect them nor interact with them—and thus the Earthlings-Venusians “relations” do not fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, pp. 126-127). On this understanding of social relations, non-overlapping groups of people are not socially related, e.g., contemporary people and future people who are non-overlapping cannot communicate and interact with each other nor adjust their conduct in light of each other’s conduct and are thus not relevantly socially related. And since they are not socially related, relational egalitarianism does not speak to such “relations.” But, as Lippert-Rasmussen notes in the fourth premise, justice *does*

pertain to relations between non-overlapping groups of people (see, e.g., Barry, 1989, pp. 189-202; Gosseries & Meyer, 2009; Meyer, 2021).

There is an important point to acknowledge in Lippert-Rasmussen's way of laying out this problem. The conclusion he reaches is that relational egalitarianism does not provide a complete theory of justice. This goes back to the third premise which says that if relational egalitarianism provides a complete account of justice, then justice does not pertain to non-overlapping generations. This fits well with the way some relational egalitarians, such as Anderson (1999; 2010) and Scheffler (2003), conceive of relational egalitarianism. They argued, as pointed out above, against distributive theories of justice, wanting to show that justice is ultimately a matter of relations, not distributions. They may be understood as defending relational egalitarianism as a complete theory of justice. So they will be vulnerable to Lippert-Rasmussen's way of describing the problem. But some relational egalitarians, such as Schemmel (2021), do not defend relational egalitarianism as a complete theory of justice. They argue that it is a particularly important part of justice, but not (necessarily) the only part. Such relational egalitarians will not be disappointed by the conclusion of the argument—that relational egalitarianism does not provide a complete account of justice—because, in their eyes, relational egalitarianism was never meant to provide a complete account of justice.

To challenge such relational egalitarians, the problem of intergenerational justice must be understood differently. This is not to deny that Lippert-Rasmussen's argument brings valuable insights. It shows that relational egalitarianism cannot provide a complete theory of justice (and thereby shows such “monistic” relational egalitarians to be wrong), and this is an important point. It means, at least, that we need an additional theory of justice. But the problem of intergenerational justice will hit harder if it can also encompass those relational egalitarians who do not argue that relational egalitarianism provides a complete theory of justice. So, instead of saying that it challenges relational egalitarianism as a *complete* theory of justice, we should say that the problem of intergenerational justice challenges relational egalitarianism as a *plausible*—or extensionally adequate—theory of justice. The idea is that even if a theory of

justice is not the whole of justice, it is implausible *as a theory of justice* if it is completely silent on matters relating to non-overlapping generations. We should expect that it at least has something to say. But relational egalitarianism is silent in this respect. This is how I shall understand *the problem of intergenerational justice*.

Of course, some relational egalitarians may not think this makes their theory implausible. But I think that they should admit at least two things. First, that *if* their theory could speak to matters relating to non-overlapping generations as well, that would make for a more promising theory of justice, all else equal. So they should still be interested in the problem of intergenerational justice thus understood (and thus in the investigation that follows). Second, if relational egalitarianism is silent when it comes to intergenerational justice, that makes the theory more vulnerable. It increases the risk that the theory becomes superfluous. After all, it removes an arena in which it may outperform another theory of justice. But it also makes it more vulnerable in the sense that if another theory does speak to both intra- and intergenerational justice, this should speak in favor of this theory, all else equal (at least if theoretical unity is a desideratum, and that is usually the case). This puts more pressure on relational egalitarianism. So the problem is dialectically important as well. In sum, the *problem of intergenerational justice* is that relational egalitarianism implausibly implies that justice does not require anything between non-overlapping generations. The problem, in this revised form, should be of interest also to relational egalitarians who do not defend relational egalitarianism as a complete theory of justice.

Section 3 – Relations and non-overlapping generations

Now, we started with the lexical view according to which “X and Y are socially related [if and] only if (i) X is socially related to Y and Y is socially related to X; and (ii) X can causally affect Y and Y can causally affect X”; (iii) X and Y can adjust their conduct in light of each other’s conduct and communicate (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, pp. 126, 128). This is the view which lands relational egalitarians in the problem

of intergenerational justice since, on this view, non-overlapping groups of people are not relevantly related. But there are other views of what it means to be relevantly related. Let us explore some of these.

Note that the lexical view is a *two-way* view: it requires both that X can causally affect and communicate with Y, and that Y can causally affect and communicate with X. So, relational egalitarians could instead adopt:

The One-way View. X and Y are socially related if (and only if) (i) X is socially related to Y and Y is socially related to X; (ii) X can causally affect Y or Y can causally affect X; and (iii) X can communicate with Y or Y can communicate with X (Bengtson, 2023; cp. Sommers, 2023).

This view also comes in a *moralized* version according to which X and Y are socially related if (and only if) “X is able to treat Y in one of the ways identified by relational egalitarians as objectionable or Y is able to treat X in one of the ways identified by relational egalitarians as objectionable” (Bengtson, 2023, p. 4). These objectionable ways include domination, paternalism and racism (Anderson, 1999, pp. 301, 312; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, p. 86). On the One-way View—irrespective of whether it is the non-moralized or the moralized version—non-overlapping generations are relevantly related. Just to illustrate on the non-moralized One-way View, contemporary people can causally affect future people—e.g., to take an extreme case, they can set a bomb to go off in 50 years—and they can communicate with future people, e.g., they can leave a video clip for them, or they can write a message in a law. Thus, by adopting the One-Way View, relational egalitarians can point out that non-overlapping generations are relevantly related such that their relations fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism.

Another view of relations which relational egalitarians could adopt would be contractualist. Some relational egalitarians are contractualists. As Anderson (2010b, p. 22) says, “most relational egalitarians follow a second-person or interpersonal conception of justification. This follows from their

contractualism.” Anderson also utilizes contractualism in her 2010 book: “I shall use the general contractualist idea to identify objectionable types of interpersonal relations and reasonable alternatives to them” (Anderson, 2010a, p. 17). And, more recently, Quong (2018) argues that the most plausible understanding of relational egalitarianism takes a contractualist form (see also Scanlon, 2018). To focus discussion, let us understand contractualism in Scanlonian terms according to which “an act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behavior that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement” (Scanlon, 2000, p. 153).⁹ Reasonable rejectability is at the heart of this view: we owe it to each other, as a matter of interpersonal morality, to not treat each other in ways, or in accordance with principles, that one could reasonably reject.¹⁰ For a rejection of a treatment, or a principle, to count as *reasonable*, one must give appropriate weight to the moral claims of other people (Frick, 2016, p. 231).

Now, the scope of (relational) contractualism extends as far as the moral relationship extends, where the *moral relationship* is the one in which the reasonable rejectability criterion applies. As Gibb (2016: 140) explains, “the moral relationship is typically presented as a relationship constituted by a capacity for rational thought, or for assessing reasons and justifications.”¹¹ So among whom does the moral relationship exist? Gibb (2016, p. 141) explains that some relationships, such as friendship, seem to require that both parties are presently alive. But other relationships—such as the parent-child relationship and the ancestor relationship—do not require temporal overlap. As opposed to the former type of relationship which seems to be constituted by some form of reciprocity, this latter type is constituted by shared properties or historical or biological facts. In being a relationship constituted by rationality, the moral relationship is of the second type. And this means that temporal overlap is not required. Indeed, “when making decisions about actions that may affect persons in the future,” Gibb (2016, p. 141) argues, “it seems clear that I can acknowledge their rational capacity for assessing justifications, and so both succeed and fail to give such persons their appropriate standing in my deliberations” (see also Kumar, 2003a, p. 114; 2018).

As this shows, the criterion of reasonable rejectability does apply when contemporary people act towards future people. If contemporary people completely ignore the interests of future people when making a decision that will later affect them, they wrong them by failing to treat them only in ways they could not reasonably reject.¹² So, to escape the problem of intergenerational justice, relational egalitarians could adopt the following view of what it means to be relevantly related:

The Contractualist View: X and Y are relevantly related if (and only if) the criterion of reasonable rejectability applies between them (i.e., if they stand in the moral relationship).

A third view of relations which relational egalitarians could adopt to respond to the problem of intergenerational justice would be the following:

The Subjected View: X and Y are relevantly related if (and only if) X and Y are subject to the same institutions enforcing the law (cp. Blake, 2001; Nagel, 2005; Nath, 2011; Sommers, 2023; Tan, 2012).

Whether non-overlapping generations are relevantly related on this view may depend on which temporal reading of subjectedness we assume. We can say that they must be subject to the same institutions *at the same time* or *at some point in time*. For contemporary people and non-overlapping future people to be relevantly related on the former understanding requires that they are subjected at the same time. But this might be a stretch. In any case, we could also understand it in the second sense: that they must be subject to the same institutions *at some point in time*. If so, it is easier to see that contemporary people and non-overlapping future people may be relevantly related. If laws to which contemporary people are currently subjected remain in place for a long time, future people may be subject to the same laws. And if so, they would be relevantly related on this understanding of The Subjected View. So we can at least say that there

is one understanding of The Subjected View which relational egalitarians may utilize to show that non-overlapping generations fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism.

A fourth option for relational egalitarians is the following view:

The Cooperation View. X and Y are relevantly related if (and only if) they (can) cooperate with each other.

Karnein (2022) has recently argued that non-overlapping generations can cooperate.¹³ According to her, X and Y cooperate when they (i) share an aim; (ii) are responsive to each other in pursuing this aim; and (iii) mutually benefit from pursuing this aim. She uses the example of building a cathedral. In such a case, masons from non-overlapping generations—say, masons in the 16th and 17th century—can cooperate. They may share the aim of building a great cathedral, cf. (i). They may also be responsive to each other in pursuing the aim. The 16th century masons may leave written guidance to the 17th century masons of how they imagine the further construction of the cathedral to take place. And the 17th century masons may take this guidance into account in continuing to build the cathedral, cf. (ii). Lastly, cf. (iii), they may all benefit from the cathedral being built in the sense that their aim of contributing to building a cathedral will be satisfied. Of course, this requires, as Karnein points out, that one can benefit from what happens after one is dead. But she argues that it is indeed plausible to say that one can benefit from one's aim being realized when one's reasons have mattered for the way the aim is pursued and ultimately realized. And this may happen after one is dead. Just as such cooperation can consist of building a cathedral, it can consist in establishing and maintaining just institutions, Karnein argues. If we suppose Karnein's argument is successful—I will simply suppose so for the sake of argument—relational egalitarians can utilize this to say that non-overlapping generations are relevantly related because they (can) cooperate; and thus that it is false to say that the scope of relational egalitarianism does not extend to non-overlapping generations.

The discussion has pointed to four views which relational egalitarians could endorse to show that non-overlapping generations are relevantly related. We thereby get the following picture of relational egalitarian views when it comes to whether non-overlapping generations are relevantly related:

Table 1. Relations and non-overlapping generations.

	Relevant relations between non-overlapping generations?
The Lexical View	No
The One-way View	Yes
The Contractualist View	Yes
The Subjected View	Yes
The Cooperation View	Yes

The ‘Yes’-views all employ a *thin* understanding of the relevant relations, e.g., a one-way relationship, a moral relationship, a cooperative relationship, etc.¹⁴ I will now argue that this leads to two problems for these views: The *External Problem* and the *Internal Problem*. Let me start with the former. Consider the following remarks:

Consider a case where the current generation faces a policy question about the rate of savings for future generations. If the current generation chooses policy X which involves high rates of consumption now, then a future generation 150 years from now will lead very difficult lives with very few resources, whereas if the current generation chooses policy Y, which involves far less current consumption, the future generation will have roughly the same standard of living as the current generation ... If it is unjust for the current generation to choose X over Y, what ultimately makes this choice unjust is not the bad relationship it

creates between the two generations. Rather, it seems clear that the basic injustice-making grounds have to do with how badly off the members of the future generation will be (Quong, 2018, pp. 317-318).

Quong suggests that if there is injustice in this case, then it is a matter of *well-being*, not *unequal relations*. A relational egalitarian may respond that the relational concern here is not the creation of bad relationships, but that the current generation fails to treat future generations as equals by not giving appropriate weight to their interests. Moreover, the relational egalitarian could say, it is plausible to object to the example both on grounds of inferior treatment and well-being. The two are not mutually exclusive.¹⁵ This response highlights what I think is the real problem underlying Quong's example (or, in any case, what I think is the more serious problem). This is the problem that, when we have non-overlapping generations in mind, they are only related in a highly thin sense. But if the relations are so thin, how can they justify *relational* requirements of justice at all, as opposed to *distributive* requirements of justice? Indeed, one might say that the relations are so thin that they are not relations in any justice-relevant sense of the word. If so, we can say that a problem with the 'Yes'-views is that it is by no means clear how such thin relations can ground *relational* requirements of justice, as opposed to *distributive* requirements having to do with how badly off current generations leave future generations. At least there is an argumentative burden which relational egalitarians must lift. This is the *External Problem* facing the 'Yes'-views.

A relational egalitarian may respond here that, as we have seen with the relational contractualist view, there can be relational requirements of justice between non-overlapping generations. The criterion of reasonable rejectability, for example, is in play when contemporary people act toward future people.¹⁶ While this may be true, I am not sure that it shows much. My worry is that the sense in which such requirements are *relational* is one that may not help relational egalitarians in this case. To see why, consider some of the factors that can make a principle reasonably rejectable by an individual.¹⁷ One factor is the *burden* it imposes on an individual, e.g., whether it harms that individual. Another factor is whether the

principle is *unfair* to an individual. “It is sufficient ground for rejecting a principle,” Scanlon (2000, p. 219) explains, “that it singles others out, without justification, for a privileged moral status.” Note that these factors—burdens, unfairness—are not particular to relational egalitarianism in any sense. They are factors that distributive egalitarians, including luck egalitarians, usually point to. The same goes for the relational response above: that the relational problem in Quong’s example is that the current generation fails to treat future generations as equals by not giving appropriate weight to their interests. This may simply be a matter of respecting their basic moral equality (Eidelson, 2015, p. 97). Indeed, this is what the above quote from Scanlon suggests. It may be relational in the sense that it has to do with interpersonal morality—a matter of what we owe to each other—but it does not seem to be relational in the *social* sense that is characteristic of relational egalitarianism. Again, my worry is that the sense in which such requirements are *relational* is one that may not help relational egalitarians much in this case. Perhaps the relational egalitarian could argue that the External problem relies on the assumption that distributive requirements are less demanding than relational requirements, and this is false. But then the assumption would have to be shown to be false, and in a way that applies to the case of non-overlapping generations.

In any case, even if we suppose that relational egalitarians can provide a solution to the External Problem—that is, even if we suppose that they can explain why such thin relations can ground relational requirements of justice—there is a further problem. Given that the relations at stake in the ‘Yes’-views are so thin, how can *egalitarianism* be what is required? Let me explain. Consider the following view:

Relational Sufficiencyarianism. A society is just only if people relate to each other as sufficient, where relating as sufficient requires regarding and treating each other as having sufficiently high standing (Bengtson and Nielsen, 2023, p. 902; see also Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018; 2021).

This view is different from Relational Egalitarianism. Whereas Relational Egalitarianism requires that people relate as *equals*, Relational Sufficiencyarianism only requires that people relate as *sufficient*. Relational

Sufficientarianism is, in that sense, a less demanding view than Relational Egalitarianism. To illustrate, consider how Lippert-Rasmussen describes Anderson's view when it comes to *aesthetic standing*:

the ideal that we relate to one another as sufficient, aesthetically speaking, is implicit in Anderson's idea that justice does not require that we adopt aesthetic norms such that we are all equally beautiful, only norms which are such that we are all deemed "an acceptable presence in civil society" (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, p. 9n21).

As this shows, relating as aesthetic sufficient is different from, and less demanding than, relating as aesthetic equals. And we can make a similar point when it comes to *social standing*. Now, it seems much more reasonable to say that thick social relations require that people relate as social equals than that thin social relations require that people relate as social equals. Indeed, when it comes to thin social relations, it seems much more natural to say that all that is required is that people relate as social sufficient; that thinner relations give rise to less demanding relational requirements. The challenge, then, is that relational egalitarians must explain why people who are so thinly related as non-overlapping generations are owe each other more than, say, relating as *sufficient*. This is the *Internal Problem*. It is an internal problem in the sense that even if relational egalitarians can explain why thin relations give rise to relational requirements of justice, cf. the External Problem, this still does not explain why non-overlapping generations must relate *as equals*. And absent such a further explanation, relational egalitarians qua relational *egalitarians* have still not provided a solution to the problem of intergenerational justice.

A relational egalitarian may respond to the Internal Problem as follows. It is not that we do not have to treat future people, with whom we are non-overlapping, as equals. It is just that what it takes to relate as equals to more distant people (such as future people) is less demanding than what it takes to relate as equals to less distant people (such as our fellow citizens). This is still equality, not sufficiency.¹⁸ What should we think of this response? I think the following. First, the response assumes that we must

relate as equals to our fellow citizens, but that is actually question-begging in the present context. Consider what Scheffler presents as a necessary requirement for relating as equals:

Egalitarian Deliberative Constraint (EDC): If you and I have an egalitarian relationship, then I have a standing disposition to treat your strong interests as playing just as significant a role as mine in constraining our decisions and influencing what we will do. And you have a reciprocal disposition with regard to my interests. In addition, both of us normally act on these dispositions. This means that each of our equally important interests constrains our joint decisions to the same extent (Scheffler 2015, p. 25; cp. Viehoff 2014, p. 353).

A relational sufficientarian may argue that while it is true that we must relate as equals in close relationships, such as friendships, and therefore satisfy the EDC, this is not the case in less close relationships, such as relationships among citizens, where it suffices that we grant our co-citizens' interests some weight in our deliberations. Indeed, as others have argued, it is not clear that relational egalitarian requirements travel from the friendship case to the co-citizen case (Bengtson and Nielsen, 2023; Viehoff, 2019). Importantly, it seems that saying that the EDC is not a requirement among co-citizens is not just to say that relating as equals to co-citizens is less demanding than relating as equals to friends. It seems more plausible to say that the reason co-citizens do not have to satisfy the EDC is simply that they do not have to relate as equals (as opposed to, say, sufficientists). And we can say the same in relation to future people. If the relational requirements are less demanding when it comes to future people, that seems most naturally to be because contemporary people do not have to relate as equals to future people (as opposed to, say, sufficientists).

Second, and relatedly, the response—that they are still requirements to relate as equals, it is just that they become less demanding the more distant the relation—seems to become less and less plausible the more distant the relation becomes. Following the response, the more distant the future people

concerned, the less demanding the relational egalitarian requirements will be. But, arguably, there comes a point where the demands are so much less demanding that it does not continue to make sense to say that they are still demands to relate *as equals* (at least not without deflating what it means to relate as equals). Of course, we could still continue to call them requirements to relate *as equals*. But that would not cut much ice against those who are not already committed relational egalitarians (as opposed to, say, relational sufficientarians).

Third, consider an analogue response in discussions of distributive justice. Suppose it turned out that justice requires that we leave enough resources for future people, but not an equal amount. In that case, the distributive egalitarian may respond that this is not because egalitarianism is false when it comes to how we must treat future people. It is simply that what it takes to treat future people as equals, distributive justice-wise, is less demanding than what it takes to treat contemporary people as equals. This would not be a convincing reply to the sufficientarian arguing that what intergenerational justice requires is distributive sufficiency, not distributive equality. If it is not a convincing reply in the distributive context, why should it be in the relational context?

Fourth, I think we can provide an error theory for why the response may initially look plausible (if it does). This may be because we (implicitly) assume that basic moral equality is tied to relational egalitarianism, such that even weaker requirements, having to do with basic moral equality, are still requirements of relational egalitarianism. But that is false. Basic moral equality is not tied to relational egalitarianism. Relational sufficientarianism also acknowledges basic moral equality (Bengtson and Nielsen, 2023, p. 907). If so, the response does not solve the Internal Problem for relational egalitarians. Relational egalitarians will have to come up with something else.

In sum, we can present the challenge to relational egalitarians in the form of a dilemma:

The Intergenerational Justice Dilemma for Relational Egalitarians: Either relational egalitarians adopt the Lexical View of social relations, but in that case the theory does not speak to relations between non-overlapping generations (the problem of intergenerational justice);¹⁹ Or relational egalitarians adopt a non-lexical understanding of (social) relations in which case the theory does speak to relations between non-overlapping generations, but then (a) it is not clear that the relations are thick enough to ground *relational*, as opposed to *distributive*, requirements of justice, and (b) even if the relations are thick enough to ground relational requirements, it is hard to see that they can justify *egalitarian*, as opposed to, say, *sufficientarian*, relational requirements.

If relational egalitarians want to provide a solution to the problem of intergenerational justice, in other words, they must solve not only the External Problem, but also the Internal Problem. And I suspect, given the discussions in this paper, that providing an answer to the latter problem will prove much more difficult than providing an answer to the former. Over to you, relational egalitarians.

Notes

¹ For much more on relational egalitarianism, see, e.g., Anderson, 1999; Bengtson, 2020; Bidadanure, 2016; Fourie, 2012; Fourie et. al., 2015; Hojlund, 2022; Kolodny, 2014; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018; McTernan, 2018; Miller, 1998; Mulkeen, 2020; Nath, 2020; O’Neill, 2008; Satz, 2010; Scheffler, 2003; 2005; 2015; Schemmel, 2012; 2021; Schmidt, 2022; Sharp, 2022; Tomlin, 2014; Viehoff, 2014; 2019; Voigt, 2018; Wilson, 2019; Wolff, 1998; Young, 1990.

² Even those who believe that distributions in themselves matter for justice usually also believe that relational egalitarianism is part of what justice requires (see, e.g., Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018; Moles and Parr, 2019).

³ Note that there is a significant difference between the two formulations. Whereas the latter specifies a negative view according to which justice requires that people do not relate as unequals, the former specifies a positive view according to which justice requires that people relate as equals. These views are different, e.g., people living on different, isolated islands would satisfy the negative view, but it would not satisfy the positive view since there would be no equal relations in that case. For more on the difference between the negative and positive view, see Tomlin (2014). I will assume the positive view in this paper.

⁴ For instance, according to *luck egalitarianism*, arguably the most prominent distributive theory of justice, individuals' distributive positions should reflect only their relative exercise of responsibility (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2015). For more on distributive views of justice, see e.g., Arneson (1989), Cohen (1989), Dworkin (2000) and Lippert-Rasmussen (2015). For arguments that responsibility should also play a role in relational egalitarianism, see Schmidt (2022) and Stemplowska (2011).

⁵ See also the references mentioned in footnote 1.

⁶ For instance, if a husband always trumps his wife in their collective decisions, such that his interests determine what they do together, the husband fails to regard and treat his wife as an equal, and they therefore do not relate as equals.

⁷ I do not mean to suggest that this is the only problem facing relational egalitarianism. Another problem is the *pervasiveness problem*, i.e., the problem that relational egalitarians must come up with a convincing explanation of which inegalitarian relationships are unjust, and which are not, given the plausible assumption that some inegalitarian relationships are not unjust, e.g., the relationship between a university teacher and their student or a parent and their child. For discussion, see, e.g., Scheffler (2005: 17-18).

⁸ I do not mean to imply that *all* relational egalitarians adopt this understanding of social relations. But it is a widespread view of what it means to be socially related, and, as the references in the main text suggest, some prominent relational egalitarians do adopt this understanding. One might think that this understanding—especially due to the second condition (the causal condition)—does not apply between members of the same political community, and since this is a standard relationship for relational egalitarianism, this may suggest that many relational egalitarians adopt a different understanding. This may be a result of reading the second clause too narrowly. It points to ability (whether X *can* causally affect Y), not to actuality, so it is not clear that it does not capture relations within a political community. In any case, I will discuss other understandings of social relations as we move along. Most, if not all, relational egalitarians adopt (at least implicitly) one of these understandings. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

⁹ As Hieronymi (2011: 106) explains, Scanlon's underlying, core idea is familiar from political philosophy: "we imagine ourselves as both legislators and citizens, creating the principles by which we will then govern ourselves."

¹⁰ Note that contractualism can be understood in a minimalistic and a non-minimalistic sense. The minimalistic sense applies reasonable rejectability not to actual treatment but to the principles that justify acting in a certain way; it is a matter of rejectability of principles, not rejectability of actions. The non-minimalistic sense includes the latter. For the purposes of this paper, I do not have to decide between them. I thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

¹¹ This is why inanimate objects such as nature do not fall within the scope of contractualism (Gibb, 2016: 141).

¹² There is a practical problem in the sense that the interests of unknown persons must be included in the deliberation (note that this is not only a problem with temporal separation but also with spatial separation (Gibb, 2016: 142)). In such situations, Scanlon (2000: 203-204; see also Kumar, 2003b) explains, "Our assessment cannot be based on the particular aims, preferences, and other characteristics of specific individuals. We must rely instead on commonly available information about what people have reason to want. I will refer to this as information about generic reasons ... [Generic reasons are] reasons that we can see that people have in virtue of their situation, characterized in general terms, and such things as their aims and capabilities and the condition in which they are placed." So, for instance, contemporary people may take it is a generic reason of future persons that they have an interest in not suffering from (the effects of) heavy pollution.

¹³ I should make clear that Karnein has not used this to argue that relational egalitarianism extends to non-overlapping generations. I am trying to show why her view might be useful for relational egalitarians as a view of which relations ground relational egalitarianism.

¹⁴ I mean thin both in an absolute and a relative sense. In an absolute sense because they imply that people, say, in the 17th century and people in the 21st century may be relevantly related (and people in the 21st century and people in the 23rd century). In a relative sense because the four views, at least in societies as we know them, can be satisfied without the Two-way View being satisfied, but not vice versa. It may be helpful to think of views of relations along a continuum, moving from thinnest to thickest. It may even be that we should distinguish both *temporal distance* and *spatial distance* and say that they together constitute density. Consider the moral relationship (cf. the Contractualist View) I may have with my neighbor's baby, who is likely to be born tomorrow. Is this necessarily thinner than the social relationship (cf. the Two-way View) I have with my fellow citizen whom I have never met? Perhaps we should say that whereas it is thinner in terms of temporal distance, it might not necessarily be thinner in terms of spatial distance. But I suspect that our intuitions about this case may be affected by our implicitly assuming that I will be socially related to the baby tomorrow. In any case, I am primarily interested in relations between non-overlapping generations who are distant in both the temporal and spatial sense. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this intriguing issue.

¹⁵ I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this response.

¹⁶ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me in this respect.

¹⁷ For these factors, see Frick (2016: 232).

¹⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this response.

¹⁹ O'Neill seems to accept the first horn of the dilemma: "We may think that it is a shame that Inca peasants or Stone Age hunter-gatherers were not better off than they actually were. Their lives were, no doubt, marked by terrible forms of suffering and deprivation, and this was in itself bad. However, it seems to be a mischaracterization of our concern for the well-being of each person to think that what was bad about the deprivations of ancient peasants was the inequality between their position and our own ... [W]e do not need to appeal to strongly egalitarian considerations in order to make sense of the badness of the suffering of these ancient Incas. Indeed, an appeal to a comparative judgment seems to lack any real bite in this case, given that none of the egalitarian reasons (b)—(f) [the following relational egalitarian reasons: "inequality (b) creates stigmatizing differences in status with the badly-off feeling like, and being treated as, inferiors; (c) creates objectionable relations of power and domination; (d) weakens self-respect; (e) creates servility and differential behavior; and (f) undermines healthy fraternal social relations" (O'Neill, 2008: 126)] obtain with regard to the relationship between these ancient peasants and us now. Those who hold a strongly egalitarian view [relational egalitarians] should regret the fact that the societies in which these ancient peasants lived were themselves marked by inegalitarian social relations, such as unacceptable forms of servility, power, and domination, if their lives did indeed have these features. But this also has nothing to do with the comparison of their lives to our lives. This situation would be different if we stood in some real social relation to these ancient peasants..." (O'Neill, 2008: 134-135; see also Kolodny, 2014: 293; Schemmel, 2021: 294).

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