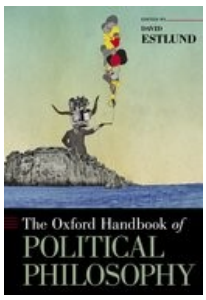

The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy

David Estlund (ed.)

https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195376692.001.0001

Published: 2012 **Online ISBN:** 9780199968886 **Print ISBN:** 9780195376692

CHAPTER

2 Equality

Elizabeth Anderson

https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195376692.013.0002 Pages 40–57

Published: 18 September 2012

Abstract

This article proposes a broader conception of equality that aims to recover the rich insights of the history of egalitarian thought and contemporary egalitarian social movements. On this view, "equality" refers to egalitarian ideals of social relations. It advocates a relational conception of equality that is superior to the distributive conception in part because it offers a better framework for understanding the history of egalitarian political theory and the concerns of egalitarian social movements. The latter, in turn, provide compelling normative reasons for adopting the relational conception.

Keywords: egalitarians, social movements, social relations, social hierarchy, relational conception, distributive conception

Subject: Social and Political Philosophy, Philosophy

Series: Oxford Handbooks

1. Equality: A Distributive Principle or an Ideal of Social Relations?

"Equality" in contemporary analytic philosophy is usually taken to refer to an equal distribution of goods. Post-Rawlsian debates over equality have started from the assumption that some kind of distributive equality is required and focused on *which* goods (resources, primary goods, advantages, capabilities, welfare, or opportunities for these) should be equally distributed and what kinds of considerations (such as desert, responsibility for the consequences of one's voluntary choices, and incentives that induce people to improve the lot of the least advantaged) can justify deviations from equality (Sen 1980; Arneson 2000b; Cohen 1989; Dworkin 1981; Pogge 2000).[1]

This chapter proposes a broader conception of equality that aims to recover the rich insights of the history of egalitarian thought and contemporary egalitarian social movements. On this view, "equality" refers to egalitarian ideals of social relations. Egalitarians aim to replace social hierarchies with relations of social equality on the ground that individuals are fundamentally moral equals. Historically, egalitarians have

aimed their critiques at many different types of social hierarchy, including slavery, serfdom, debt peonage, feudalism, monarchy, oligarchy, caste and class inequality, racism, patriarchy, colonialism, and stigmatization based on sexuality, disability, and bodily appearance. They have envisioned a wide variety of models of equality in social relations, including communes, state communism, anarchism and syndicalism, companionate marriage, multiculturalism (in some guises), republicanism, democracy, socialism, and social democracy. Each of these conceptions includes some concern for distributive outcomes. However,
p. 41 egalitarianism has a much wider social agenda than is captured by distributive demands ↳ (Young 1990). Feminists seek reproductive autonomy for women. There is no good that is being distributed equally when this egalitarian demand is met. In other cases, the equal distribution of a good does not satisfy the demand for equality. "Separate but equal" bathroom facilities for members of different racial groups would still be unequal even if the quality of facilities were equal, because their function is to constitute despised racial groups as untouchables—as an inferior caste. Egalitarian social movements have focused primarily on equality in social relations and tended to treat egalitarian distributions as conditions for or consequences of relational equality.

Against this relational conception of equality, one might object that the concept of equality is essentially quantitative: For two people to be equal, they must possess or enjoy equal amounts of some good. To be sure, we can describe relational egalitarian goals in terms that suggest such a picture: We can say that egalitarians seek a society in which people enjoy equal authority, status, or standing. However, authority, status, and standing essentially refer to types of interpersonal relations. To enjoy these goods is precisely to stand in certain social relations to others. There is nothing more to enjoying equal "amounts" of these goods than standing in certain types of symmetrical social relations with others. By contrast, within the distributive conception of equality, the good to be distributed equally—resources, welfare, capabilities, and so on—is such that the amount that one person has is typically logically independent of the amount of the good that the others in the comparison class have and also often logically independent of that person's social relations to the others in the comparison class. Equality in the distributive conception consists in the mere coincidence of what one person has with what others in the comparison class independently have and need not entail that the persons being compared stand in any social relations with one another. They might even live on different planets and have no interactions with each other. On the relational view, the only comparisons that fundamentally matter are among those who stand in social relations with one another and in which the goods of equality are essentially relations of equal (symmetrical and reciprocal) authority, recognition, and standing.

Egalitarians begin by analyzing the particular social hierarchy they oppose and offering grounds for objecting to it. They then propose various remedies—institutions and norms embodying particular ideals of social equality in the domain in question. Historically, these ideals have suffered from several limitations. Most egalitarians have tended to focus on just one ground of hierarchy at a time, neglecting other equally objectionable grounds. For example, socialists in the Marxist tradition tended to focus on class inequality while repeatedly putting off the quest for gender equality (Eley 2002).[2] Egalitarian remedies have also tended to start with a limited diagnosis of the underlying structures supporting objectionable social hierarchies, failing to anticipate how privileged groups invent new ways to maintain their superior positions once old ways are blocked. For example, liberal feminists such as John Stuart Mill (1975) argued against laws forbidding women from entering trades and professions. But Mill didn't anticipate that women would still be excluded by systematic private discrimination once they achieved legal equality. Finally, conceptions of
p. 42 social equality have often ↳ been utopian.[3] They have failed to anticipate unintended bad consequences of their proposed social arrangements. Socialist ideals based on comprehensive centralized state control of the economy failed to devise an adequate substitute for market prices in determining how to efficiently allocate resources.[4]

These limitations, far from undermining egalitarian thought, have spurred its development in light of experiences in putting various ideals of equality into practice. The lessons egalitarians have thereby learned have led to three broad trends over time. First, egalitarianism has become more inclusive and cosmopolitan: No longer focused on the parochial demands of this or that subordinated group, it is sensitive to the normative demands arising from the newfound consciousness of objectionable inequalities based on age, sexuality, disability, and membership in less developed states (Eley 2002). Second, it has become more sophisticated in its understanding of needed egalitarian remedies: No longer focused on legal formalisms (such as civic equality, careers open to talents, and group-blind antidiscrimination laws), it has advanced more complex conceptions of egalitarian social policies—notably with respect to the distribution of educational opportunities, income, wealth, and public goods such as environmental quality—and also ranged well beyond state- and law-centered remedies to conceptions of a more egalitarian *civil society* and *culture*—notably in advancing ideals of differentiated civil societies, respectful representation of subordinated groups, and an egalitarian politics of epistemic authority and civil discourse (Young 2000; Fraser 1997). Third, egalitarianism has largely set aside failed ideals such as centralized planning and utopian socialism (communes) while putting greater store in varied forms of democratic organization and cultural transformation and leaving room for regulated market orderings.

2. Types of Social Hierarchy

Because ideals of equality have emerged from critiques of existing social hierarchies, to understand equality we first need to grasp the varieties of social inequality. By "social hierarchy," I refer to durable group inequalities that are systematically sustained by laws, norms, or habits. The inequalities are durable in that they are reproduced over time by the social arrangements that embody them. They are also group based: They create *classes* of people who relate to one another as superiors to inferiors. *Isolated* individual inequalities detached from systematic social arrangements—for example, a single arbitrary act of discrimination against an individual for having green eyes—may be unfair but do not amount to social hierarchy. Social hierarchies are typically based on ascriptive group identities such as race, ethnicity, caste, class, gender, religion, language, citizenship status, marital status, age, and sexuality.

Three broad types of social hierarchy have been subject to egalitarian critique. First are hierarchies of domination or command. In these systems, those occupying inferior positions are subject to the arbitrary, unaccountable authority of social ↳ superiors and thereby made powerless. They must obey the commands of their superiors and ask their permission to exercise various liberties. To be subordinate in such a social relationship is to be unfree in the republican sense (Pettit 1997). This is the source of the egalitarian equation of freedom with equality. Freedom is achieved by liberating the oppressed from subordination in a dominance hierarchy and enabling them to govern themselves—either individually, under a system of common laws guaranteeing everyone's liberty rights, or collectively, in democratic forms of government whereby each has an equal voice in determining the laws to which all are subject, or in deciding who shall enact the laws. The paradigm case of a hierarchy of domination is slavery. Republicans, feminists, and socialists have applied the concept of slavery and its critique to undermine monarchy, patriarchal marriage, and capitalist wage relations ("wage slavery").

p. 43

The second type of objectionable social inequality is hierarchies of esteem. In these systems, those occupying inferior positions are stigmatized—subject to publicly authoritative stereotypes that represent them as proper objects of dishonor, contempt, disgust, fear, or hatred on the basis of their group identities and hence properly subject to ridicule, shaming, shunning, segregation, discrimination, persecution, and even violence. In some cases, subordinate group members may be allowed to participate in mainstream organizations and benefits but only on the condition that they repress, hide, or abandon their stigmatized identities—for example, their sexual orientation, religion, language, customary dress, or ethnically

distinctive name. Because esteem is positional, public representations of socially stigmatized groups are always shaped in invidious contrast to the stereotypes ascribed to those possessing honored group identities.

The third type of objectionable social inequality is hierarchies of standing. In these systems, the interests of those occupying superior social positions are given special weight in the deliberations of others and in the normal (habitual, unconscious, often automatic) operation of social institutions. As a result, those of higher rank enjoy greater rights, privileges, opportunities, or benefits than their social inferiors. They often have special standing to make claims on others and special influence over decisions in which their interests are at stake, especially when their interests conflict with others'. The 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. They typically lack standing to make claims on others or have access only to inferior channels through which to make claims and have little influence over decisions in which their interests are at stake, especially in conflict cases.

Hierarchies of esteem, domination, and standing are often joined. The same groups that enjoy high esteem also exercise command over the actions of inferiors, enjoy greater access to resources and opportunities, and have special influence over decisions and the operation of institutions affecting their interests. The same groups that are stigmatized are confined to subordinate positions in command hierarchies, lack access
p. 44 to opportunities and resources, and are neglected or actively oppressed ↳ in the decisions and operation of institutions affecting their interests. However, as Nancy Fraser (1997) has argued, this is not always so. Gay men suffer stigmatization but do not appear to suffer from a relative overall lack of access to resources and opportunities, even if they are victims of discrimination in particular organizations such as the military. Middle- and upper-class married white women under the common law of coverture were legally subordinate to their husbands but often enjoyed considerable access to resources. Members of the "respectable" lower middle class of England were often poorer than their working-class neighbors but enjoyed higher esteem (Orwell 1937).

For analytical purposes it is useful to distinguish these three types of hierarchy even if they always coincided. Fraser (1997) distinguishes between "recognition" and "redistribution" and argues that egalitarian programs addressing one type of inequality sometimes reinforce inequality in the other. "Recognition" corresponds to esteem hierarchies and "redistribution" roughly to hierarchies of standing. We must add "command" hierarchies to offer a complete account of the objects of egalitarian critique.

3. Egalitarian Critiques of Social Hierarchy

The realm of values is divided into three great domains: the good, the right, and the virtuous (Dewey 1981). Each is defined in relation to the perspective from which people make judgments about each type. Judgments of goodness are made from a first-person perspective—that is, from the perspective of one enjoying, remembering, or anticipating the enjoyment of some object, individually or in concert with others ("us"). The experience of goodness—the sign or evidence of goodness—is one's felt attraction to an appealing object. Judgments of moral rightness are made from a second-person perspective, in which one person asserts the authority (in his or her own person or on behalf of another) to make claims on another—to demand that the other respect the rights or pay due regard to the interests of the claimant and to hold the other accountable for doing so. Judgments of moral wrongness, therefore, are essentially expressible as complaints by or on behalf of a victim that are addressed to agents who are held responsible for wrongdoing (Darwall 2006). The experience of encountering a valid claim of rightness is that of feeling *required* to do something, of being commanded by a legitimate authority. Judgments of virtue are made from the third-person perspective of an observer and judge of people's conduct and underlying dispositions. The experience of virtue is one's felt approval or admiration of people's character or powers as expressed in their conduct.

Egalitarians evaluate social inequality from all three perspectives. They condemn it as morally wrong, in the specific sense that it is *unjust* to those placed in inferior positions; they argue that it is *bad* for people—not
p. 45 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. Of these three types of egalitarian critique, judgments of justice dominate. This is apt, because it is with respect to judgments of justice that the specifically *egalitarian* assumption of the moral equality of persons plays the most critical role. However, the proper formulation of the egalitarian assumption of moral equality depends on the type of social hierarchy being criticized.

With respect to esteem hierarchies, egalitarians argue that all human beings have a basal claim to human dignity that does not need to be earned. With respect to hierarchies of standing, egalitarians argue that all human beings have a basal claim to equal moral considerability. With respect to command hierarchies, the argument shifts from how we relate to others as the objects of their regard and actions to how we relate to each other as agents. Rational adults, rather than all human beings, figure in this egalitarian argument. The foundational justification of command hierarchy depends on the idea that some adults are fit to rule and others only to follow, because they are incapable of self-government but instead must follow the reason of others. Against this, egalitarians argue that nearly all adults possess a threshold capacity of self-government sufficient to entitle them to autonomy and hence to entitle them to reject systems in which others wield unaccountable power over them. This is an empirical claim. If Aristotle had been right to suppose that significant classes of people were natural slaves, a stable egalitarian social order would be impossible. Even in the egalitarian view, there may be isolated cases of individuals who are so severely mentally incapacitated that they cannot govern themselves. They must be the wards of others. This concession does not justify the sorts of command hierarchy that egalitarians oppose, however. No durable command hierarchy could be based on a subject population barely able to comprehend or follow orders. In addition, while the fact that some adults suffer from such disabilities justifies paternalistic authority in their cases, such authority is never unaccountable or arbitrary.

The egalitarian assumptions of moral equality are more plausible when they are deployed dialectically against defenders of social hierarchy than when they are taken as foundational philosophical claims on the basis of which a theory of a just social order can be built a priori. The sorts of social hierarchies that human societies have constructed or have ever been able to construct have all been along the lines of ascriptive

identity—such as race, caste, class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, language, and religion—that cannot in any empirically adequate theory be thought to delineate social groups whose members generally lack capacities for self-government or possess any feature on the basis of which moral considerability or basal dignity could credibly be denied or derogated. Moreover, at least in cases of extreme social inequality, such as slavery and subjection of individuals to routinized public humiliation and violence, it is hard to advance any plausible justifications for inflicting such subordination and stigmatization on anyone. This argument addresses the worst kinds of social hierarchy, forcing advocates of social inequality to retreat to milder forms.

p. 46 In response, advocates of social hierarchy typically make three claims. First, with respect to command hierarchies, they claim that certain social problems—notably but not exclusively, securing social order—can be solved only under a division of labor in which those competent to rule issue commands and others obey. Second, with respect to hierarchies of esteem and standing, inequalities of virtue—considerations of desert—can justify granting some individuals more esteem and giving their interests more weight than others. Third, such inequalities in esteem and consideration function as important incentives to productive activity. In all three cases, hierarchy is justified so long as it is grounded on genuine inequalities of merit or productivity (Kekes 2007).

Egalitarians within analytic philosophy have tended to respond to these arguments in a partially concessive spirit. Taking the object of evaluation to be a pattern in the distribution of goods, they tend to argue that equality constitutes a default baseline against which certain deviations may be justified. Thus, Rawls (1971) rejects inequalities based on desert but accepts inequalities needed to provide incentives to the more able to work in ways that improve the prospects of the least advantaged. G. A. Cohen (2008) rejects inequalities based on incentives but accepts them as rewards for differential desert. Both theories remain egalitarian in that they are founded on an assumption of the moral equality of persons, a default presumption of distributive equality, and a rejection of most of the bases on which inequality has ever been constructed.

Egalitarians in the history of political theory and those engaged in theorizing the grounds of egalitarian social movements offer a more complex response to inegalitarian claims, because they take the object of evaluation to be not simply a pattern of distribution but a system of social relations that, among its other effects, results in a distributive pattern. This enables a sociologically more sophisticated range of critiques of inequality as well as richer conceptions of what a society of equals could look like.

Consider, in this light, the first inegalitarian claim, that only command hierarchies can secure social order and other public goods. Against this claim, egalitarians divide into anarchist and democratic camps. Anarchists hold that there are no important public goods, the provision of which requires the coercive direction of some people's conduct by others. By exercising their powers of self-government, people are capable of fashioning spontaneous voluntary cooperative orders at a sufficient scale and possessing sufficient resilience to solve all the important problems that people confront (Godwin 1793; Kropotkin 1917). Hence, there is no reason why normal adults should not be entitled to make decisions for themselves in all cases. Because no adult is entitled to issue authoritative coercive commands to anyone else, every adult stands as an equal in relation to every other in an ideal anarchist society.

Democrats allow that there are some important problems, the solution to which requires the coercive coordination of individual conduct. Some coercive commands are necessary and therefore so are some commanders. Yet this does not justify setting up a hierarchy in which those in command wield
p. 47 *unaccountable* power over ↳ those commanded. This invariably invites corruption and abuse. Nor is it possible to devise a system of unaccountable power that can continuously select the most able to rule. The temptations of such power are too great: Rulers will either try to pass on their power to their offspring by the hereditary principle or the powers of command will be seized by the most ruthless. Neither selection method yields anything resembling meritocracy.

Democrats reconcile the necessity of command with the ideal of equality by conditioning the power of commanders and the legitimacy of their commands on the authorization of those to whom commands are issued. The point of this condition is to ensure the accountability of officeholders to those over whom they exercise the powers of office. Once this condition is effectively institutionalized (in part, for example, through periodic competitive elections of officeholders under a universal franchise), the ruler/subject relation is transformed into the relation of agent to principle, in which commanders are the servants of the people rather than their sovereigns. Lines of authority run from the people to officeholders before they can run back to the people.

The resulting hierarchy is of offices, not of persons. Individuals hold authority only in virtue of their office. Once out of office, or in contexts irrelevant to exercising the responsibilities of office, they have no authority over others. Their authority is limited to what they need to fulfill the function of office, to solve certain coordination problems and secure particular public goods. Democratically accountable officeholders, in holding only a mediating position between the people regarded as self-governing (as the source of the authority of laws) and the people regarded as subject to the laws, do not thereby constitute a social hierarchy in the sense of distinct classes of rulers and ruled. Of course, the temptations are ever present for officeholders to turn themselves into such a hierarchy. Democratic egalitarians therefore focus on such matters as strengthening the mechanisms of accountability, limiting the powers of office, and blocking the moves officeholders tend to take to entrench their power and constitute themselves as a self-perpetuating ruling class.

Consider now the second inegalitarian claim: defending inequalities in esteem on the basis of virtue. Again, such a claim, if interpreted as a bare distributive pattern, seems destined to require concessions from egalitarians. One who takes this claim to vindicate social inequality would therefore wonder at the fact that many egalitarians, including Rousseau (1761), Godwin (1793), Wollstonecraft (1792), and Paine (1792), took regard for virtue as a ground for the *critique* of esteem hierarchies. They argued that social hierarchies are invariably based not on genuine inequalities of virtue but on morally arbitrary differences such as aristocratic birth, economic class, and gender. More important, they argued that the erection of social hierarchy on the basis of competition for unequal esteem undermines the very virtues it claims to uphold. According to Rousseau (1761), as soon as people begin to seek superior esteem from others, virtue *ceases*. For people, in fact, offer their esteem to counterfeits of virtue—conspicuous displays of wealth and power, superficial beauty, derisive wit, sophisticated manners. Vanity, not virtue, becomes ↳ the dominant motive in society. It drives the quest for superior income, wealth, and power over others.

p. 48

When society seeks to reward virtue with superior *standing*—that is, not just with esteem but with material benefits, special privileges, or exemptions from the constraints binding on others—these inducements or supposedly deserved rewards for virtue only drive it further from the scene. When wealth is taken as the deserved reward and hence a mark of estimability, people seek it directly rather than by cultivating virtue. Once attained, riches, privileges, and exemptions swell people's heads and make them feel entitled to mistreat others. In the competition to attain them, people try to prove their own superiority by abusing, enslaving, and humiliating others.

Rousseau's (1988) (partial) solution to the problem of competition for unequal esteem and standing is to provide an alternative ground of esteem and standing that is universalizable, nonpositional, and positive-sum. Equal citizenship status in a republic provides such a ground. When fellow citizens meet in the public square, they meet as co-sovereigns—as co-creators and guarantors of the republic that makes them free and independent. Each can stand erect before everyone else; no one has to bow and scrape before another. Everyone basks in the glory of the republic they jointly sustain. This basal equality of esteem, expressed in the upright bearing of the free citizen and the recognition of that status with all its rights and dignity by fellow citizens, constitutes the essential background condition for the practice of republican virtue. Thus, genuine virtue requires an underlying equality of esteem. Kant (2002) translates Rousseau's political vision

to the universal moral realm of a notional kingdom of ends, turning the equal and reciprocal recognition citizens of a republic grant each other qua citizens into the dignity justly claimed by all persons as such, regardless of nationality or citizenship status. Importantly, this dignity entails a basal level of not only esteem but also of standing as a morally considerable being and a bearer of rights.

Defenders of social hierarchy might concede the importance of this basic human dignity and its implications for moral standing while still insisting on the ineliminability and importance of earned or merited esteem based on the realization of objective human excellences, such as outstanding scientific, artistic, and athletic achievement. It is possible that once social arrangements secure this equality of basic human dignity and standing, Rousseau's objections to esteem competition can be handled by additional arrangements. If so, egalitarians need not object to inequalities of achievement-based esteem, provided that the economy of esteem is configured in such a way as to prevent the reproduction of *group* hierarchy over time. What matters for social equality is not so much the unequal distribution of esteem in itself as its grounds, along with the structure of opportunities for attaining it. Egalitarians above all seek to end esteem hierarchies based on social group identities. Stigmatizing or honoring persons on the basis of their race, class, caste, gender, or similar identity is unjust and morally arbitrary. Such identities are neither meritorious in themselves nor a just proxy for genuine merits, opportunities for the acquisition and display of which must
p. 49 be open to all. Thus, titles of nobility, ↳ privileges of race and gender, and other official markers of unequal esteem accorded to identity groups should be abolished. Norms that entitle everyone to be treated civilly should be promulgated.

Egalitarians do not rest content with a laissez-faire system of competition for achievement esteem, even when the grounds for esteem are genuine human excellences and not counterfeits such as ethnicity and wealth. The temptation of those who earn esteem on the basis of superior achievement is to organize as a group so as to convert esteem into privilege, exclude outsiders, and monopolize access to the means of achievement to perpetuate the ingroup's intergenerational access. Alumni of elite schools, even if they were admitted on academic achievement alone, want their children to enjoy preferential admission. Moreover, they want their school or league to monopolize the power to define the terms of the prestige hierarchy so that their school or league stays on top. This involves such moves as defining exclusion as intrinsically meritorious (for example, taking selective admissions as a criterion of quality in itself) and downplaying service to the lower orders as a measure of institutional quality (for example, excluding from quality measures the degree to which a school opens up opportunities for achievement to the less advantaged).

Egalitarians support opposing strategies. With respect to individual opportunities to achieve excellence, egalitarians seek to eliminate barriers to entry (for example, alumni preferences), multiply criteria of merit beyond those monopolized by the advantaged (for example, to count overcoming adversity as a merit), and open up opportunities to develop merits to members of all social groups, especially the less advantaged, by enhancing their access to quality education and training. In general, this involves opening up access to means of developing merit that are independent of the status of their parents or identity group.

With respect to defining what counts as estimable achievement, egalitarians seek to count service to the less advantaged as estimable, because it helps to realize the society of equals that is a good for all. More generally, egalitarians seek to multiply and divide the arenas for competition so as to enable the widest possible diversity of individuals to compete. This explains part of the logic behind dividing athletic competitors by age, weight, and gender and creating competitive opportunities for the disabled, such as wheelchair basketball and the Special Olympics. The multiplication and division of domains of competitive achievement, plus wide access to means of development, help diverse people find some domain in which they can realistically compete for earned esteem (LaVaque-Manty 2009). The more *individual* competition is —the less high achievers function as groups to perpetuate their advantage by monopolizing access to the means of developing merit and the criteria for defining it—the less unequal patterns of esteem reflect and constitute an esteem *hierarchy*. Moreover, the more equal are opportunities for development, the more

estimable is superior achievement. Winning a race loses some of its luster if part of the reason for victory is that potentially superior competitors were denied a meaningful opportunity to compete. Finally, egalitarians resist attempts to convert esteem into inequalities of material standing. True virtue may earn esteem, but privilege invites the abuse and neglect of inferiors.

p. 50 Here the egalitarian critiques of social hierarchy on grounds of justice and virtue are united. Unlike contemporary analytic political philosophy, which tends to ask only what goods society offers individuals to enjoy, the egalitarian tradition regards human beings as the most important product of social arrangements. Social hierarchies undermine virtue up and down the ladder. Unaccountable power leads superiors to mistreat inferiors. Superior esteem inflames their vanity. Special privileges and influence promote egoism and short-circuit the bases of esteem competition, reducing them to vain displays of power, wealth, and advantage. People strive to accumulate superiority in such worldly goods to spite others. This has corrupting effects on social inferiors. Spite from the top inflames envy from the bottom. Subordination also makes people weak, dependent, groveling, sycophantic, and fearful. Powerlessness leads people to take a narrow, selfish view of public affairs. Instead of taking pleasure in the good of others, everyone in the social hierarchy, from top to bottom, enjoys bringing someone low.

Wollstonecraft (1792) sharpened the virtue critique of hierarchy by pointing to a different corrupting effect. If a trait is a genuine virtue, it should be regarded as a virtue regardless of who has it. Yet the reproduction of social hierarchy requires that some people be socialized for inferior roles. This process misrepresents vices as virtues befitting the inferior. Because it would not befit the inferior position imposed on them for women to be serious, strong, or courageous, women are praised for being frivolous, weak, and fearful. Such socialization may induce these vices in women, which in turn inflames a vain sense of superiority in men. Social hierarchy corrupts by systematically training subordinate groups for vice.

Finally, consider the egalitarian critique of social hierarchy on grounds of goodness. Nearly all egalitarians in the English tradition have been utilitarians who assessed the goodness of social arrangements in terms of human welfare. It is evident that social hierarchy is bad for those consigned to inferior ranks. Their fate—poverty, deprivation, unemployment or employment in grueling, dangerous, boring, servile tasks, powerlessness, humiliation, vulnerability to violence, insecurity—is obviously bad for them. Egalitarians also point to the ways in which inequality is bad for those at the top. This is an important feature of the nineteenth-century feminist critique of marriage, from Anna Doyle Wheeler and William Thompson (1996) to Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill (1975). The legal subordination of wives to their husbands, their exclusion from education, public affairs, and numerous public activities, the gendered division of labor, and the denial of the franchise to women drove men and women apart by ensuring that they share few interests and pleasures. Wives' subordination undermined the possibilities for true companionship and thus made marriage an emotionally and intellectually barren relationship for men—at least for intelligent and virtuous men.

On a society-wide scale, social hierarchy has additional ill effects. When occupants of superior ranks stake their sense of well-being in wielding unaccountable power over others, subjecting others to the humiliations of a stigmatized identity, or arranging institutions so that the interests of subordinate classes
p. 51 are systematically neglected or undermined, this undermines cooperation and eats away at the bases ↳ of social trust and solidarity. As Richard Wilkinson (2005) has documented, societies with more inequality have higher rates of violence, crime, depression, and other diseases and lower longevity, social capital, and overall happiness. More equal societies serve their members better. The question then is what kinds of institutional arrangements best embody social equality?

4. Competing Visions of an Egalitarian Society

Egalitarians have always been better at criticizing inequality than at devising a coherent and successful conception of a society of equals. This is to be expected. Although hunter-gatherer societies tend to be highly egalitarian, social hierarchy has been the rule since the rise of herding and agriculture. Ideals of equality for societies with an advanced division of labor have therefore had few models to work from; almost everything has been necessarily left to imagination and experiment. The great era of egalitarian experimentation for modern societies began with the French Revolution and flourished during the nineteenth century. Its enduring, large-scale achievements—democracy and social democracy—were not realized until after World War II.

During the nineteenth century, egalitarians focused on political and economic organization. They offered up rival visions of equality, exposing deep rifts among egalitarians along the following lines: (a) anarchism versus statism; (b) democracy versus revolutionary communism; (c) within democracy, representative versus participatory forms; (d) nation-state centered versus communal organization (utopian socialism, syndicalism); (e) state versus local worker control of productive enterprises; and (f) rejection versus use of markets to set commodity prices. Each of these visions of equality has been tested to some degree.

Anarchists never managed to win a wide following because they repudiated parliamentary politics, favoring revolution by violent insurrection without consulting the people. Their deeply undemocratic model of social transformation contradicted their professed desire to create a society of individuals living on terms of freedom and equality. Egalitarians have periodically experimented with communal forms of life, most significantly in the Israeli kibbutzim. However, these modes of organization have never enjoyed widespread appeal and have been mostly short-lived. The greatest failures were communism and state socialism, based on centralized planning of the economy and state ownership of productive enterprises. Two significant lessons were learned from these failures—the importance of democracy and the value of using competitive markets to efficiently allocate resources and promote economic growth. Social democracy incorporated these lessons while protecting people from exploitation, poverty, and excessive market risks through
p. 52 comprehensive social insurance and other policies to decommodify labor, from ↳ dignitary wages to labor unions to worker participation in corporate governance (Esping-Anderson 1990).

Three large questions remain open regarding egalitarian political and economic organization. (a) What is the proper scope of participatory democracy? While representative forms dominate modern democracies, experiments in participatory democracy continue to offer intriguing alternative possibilities (Bobbio 2003; Fung and Wright 2003). (b) What is the potential for extending democracy to the workplace? While democracy has triumphed for the governance of states, the governance of most workplaces remains autocratic. Bureaucratic forms of corporate authority (Anderson 2008), labor unions, and labor regulations can help tame social hierarchy within the firm. Yet from an egalitarian point of view there is no evident reason why workers should spend their productive lives under autocracy when citizens have repudiated autocratic governance at the state level (Walzer 1983; Bowles, Gintis, and Gustafsson 1993). In Germany, social democrats secured worker participation on corporate boards and lower levels of management in large corporations while achieving one of the most advanced and competitive economies in the world. Efficiency concerns thus do not justify workplace autocracy. Smaller-scale experiments with more democratic forms of worker-controlled enterprise continue in capitalist economies, but the results of such experiments are yet to be fully understood. (c) What is the potential for devising egalitarian political and economic institutions to transnational and even global scales? Thus far, cosmopolitan egalitarians have been long on theorizing global principles of justice (Caney 2005; Moellendorf 2002) but short on envisioning workable transnational institutional frameworks to implement such principles.[5]

This highly compressed summary of egalitarian debates in political economy illustrates two points. First, the fundamental egalitarian disagreements have been resolved not through a priori argument but through experiments in living. Ideals of social equality have been tested by putting them into practice and seeing whether people found them acceptable and appealing. Second, specifically distributive concerns have occupied only a modest part of the egalitarian agenda. Most of the work of egalitarianism has focused on transforming relations among people.

The latter point has become even more evident since the 1960s. Egalitarian social movements from the 1960s to the present have focused on overcoming bases of inequality that were largely neglected by the great egalitarian achievements of democracy and social democracy—inequalities of gender, race, sexuality, disability, and most recently, transnational inequality. Except with respect to the last issue, these new foci have led to a relative shift away from concerns of political economy toward a focus on issues of culture, representation, discourse, and the organization of civil society (Fraser 1997). The relational conception of equality I have advocated here can explain the logic of these cultural agendas better than the distributive conception can. Consider, for example, egalitarian concerns about speech. Feminist critiques of pornography and critical race theorists' critiques of hate speech are grounded in concerns about how denigrating and hateful speech can reproduce the subordination of oppressed groups. Feminist work on
p. 53 epistemic injustice (Fricker ↳ 2007)—on failures to listen to people, or grant them epistemic authority, on account of their subordinate social identity—also centrally concerns social hierarchy among speakers and listeners. Gays, lesbians, and transsexuals campaign against the wider culture's pathologizing of their sexual identities. These are campaigns against intergroup stigmatization. Egalitarians have divided over the relative merits of integration and segregation of subordinated racial and ethnic minorities. Some hold that the maintenance of distinctive identities and cultures requires accommodation of group self-segregation (Young 2000). Others argue that segregation is a linchpin of socioeconomic inequality and that integration is required to create a more democratic and tolerant culture (Anderson 2010). All of these debates focus on how members of different groups should relate to one another. It would be artificial and unilluminating to translate such issues into a distributive framework because, as noted above, the goods being "distributed" in such cases are *social relations* of equal authority, esteem, and standing. They are not such that the "amount" that one person "has" is logically independent of what others "have" or of the social relations in which each stands to the others. To put it another way, the goods of equal social relations are not "distributed" separately to individuals because they are essentially *shared* by those who stand in such relations.

5. The Distributive Implications of Relational Equality

I have argued that the relational conception of equality is superior to the distributive conception in part because it offers a better framework for understanding the history of egalitarian political theory and the concerns of egalitarian social movements. The latter, in turn, provide compelling normative reasons for adopting the relational conception. How are the two conceptions of equality related? Within the relational view, distributive concerns appear as but one part of the egalitarian agenda. Distributions matter as causes, consequences, or constituents of social relations. In general, a distribution is objectionable from an egalitarian point of view if it causes, embodies, or is a specific consequence of unjust social hierarchy. In some cases, social hierarchy is directly embodied in the unequal distribution of a good—for example, if some groups but not others have the right to vote, or some groups enjoy privileges and exemptions from general laws due to their superior standing or esteem. The case in which the state distributes nonuniversalizable special privileges and exemptions to its favorites represents the prime case in which "leveling down" is justified, due to the obligation of the state to treat all of its citizens as equals. In such cases an equal distribution of benefits and burdens is required. All adult citizens are entitled to vote and to have their vote count equally with all others. All should be equally subject to the criminal laws.

Where distributions are causally connected to social relations, one should not expect any simple distributive
p. 54 formula focused on a single core good to encapsulate ↳ the demands of relational equality. This is because the causes of different types of social hierarchy are various, and various distributive strategies can be employed to undermine or remedy the effect of any given cause. This fact helps explain Scanlon's (2009) claim that the sources of egalitarian concern are diverse. Among those he lists as egalitarian are the demand that the state treat everyone impartially by providing the same benefits to all and objections to caste and status inequality, to the domination of some people by others, and to the undue influence of the wealthy on political institutions. These seemingly diverse concerns are unified by the relational conception of equality. They amount to conceptions of the prerequisites for a society of equals and objections to the different forms of social hierarchy. They yield a variety of distributive requirements. A sufficientarian floor on income—a dignitary wage beyond bare subsistence—is needed to secure the least economically advantaged the ability to appear in public without shame and thereby to avoid stigmatization. The distribution of public educational services should be adjusted to individual need to ensure that students with physical and learning disabilities are able to acquire skills commensurate with their underlying potentials and thus enjoy equal standing with their peers. Constraints at the top of the income distribution may be needed to prevent the rich from exercising undue influence on political affairs, if, as is often the case, there are no effective alternative means to block the conversion of money into political influence. In these three examples, diverse goods—income, capabilities, and the primary good of the social bases of self-respect—appear in egalitarian distributive rules. The standard each rule sets—sufficientarianism, distribution in accordance with need, pressure toward equality (reducing the gap between the top and the bottom)—also varies with the problem to be solved.

Hence, on the relational view of equality, there is no single good that, were it to be distributed equally, would comprehend the distributive goals of egalitarianism. Distributions of various goods—income, wealth, capabilities, rights, opportunities, social esteem, state-provided goods—play different causal or constitutive roles in securing a society of equals; nor is strict equality in the distribution of goods always required to secure a society of equals. Consistently with relational equality, variation within constraints may be justified to serve other compelling societal interests, such as enabling market prices to signal to people where their efforts and other resources are best directed.

It follows that a great deal of discussion of egalitarianism within contemporary analytic philosophy is misguided. So-called "telic" egalitarianism holds that the state in which people are equally well off is good, even if they have no social or causal relation to each other. They could live on different planets, not interact in any way, and not even know of each other's existence (Parfit 2000; Temkin 2003).[6] Since the existence of the other party cannot make any difference to their lives, this state of affairs cannot be good or bad for anyone. It cannot have any implications for their virtues. Because no one is in a position to affect distributions across worlds, there is no one who can be held responsible for correcting inequalities between
p. 55 these people. It follows that this kind of equality cannot be cast as a second-person claim ↳ and so cannot be a demand of justice. It is detached from *all* of the normative concerns expressed in the history of egalitarian thought and by egalitarian social movements. As yet we have no explanation of what the goodness of this distributive equality consists in and no reason to care about it. It is irrelevant to any political concerns with equality.

More generally, the background conceptual framework of the "equality of what?" debates in contemporary political philosophy is misguided. It was launched on the assumption that there exists a single good that egalitarians should want to see equally distributed. Debates ensued as to what this good is—resources, primary goods, capabilities, welfare, and so on—and what grounds there could be—desert, responsibility, incentives, and so on—that could justify deviations from equality. On the view advanced here, the concern for equality cannot be reduced to concern about the distribution of a single good or expressed in a single

simple formula (equality or equality adjusted for permissible grounds of deviation) for its distribution. Social relations of equality are complex and require a complex response.

If the relational conception of equality better embodies the full range of normative concerns of egalitarians than the distributive conception, then two methodological implications follow for those who want to advance egalitarian thought within analytical political philosophy. First, political philosophers need to become sociologically more sophisticated. Because the object of egalitarian concern consists of systems of social relations, we need to understand how these systems work to have any hope of arriving at normatively adequate ideas. Second, we need to take seriously the pragmatist point that the value of normative ideals cannot be tested in a priori argument alone. The critical testing ground for ideals of equality is in experiments in living. We need to try living within actual social embodiments of our ideals to see whether they meet, exceed, or fail our expectations of them, whether modifications would do better, and whether certain concrete conceptions of equality should be abandoned altogether. The answers to our normative questions will not be found in texts or armchair reasoning but in life.

Notes

1. See Arneson's chapter on justice in this volume.
2. See Levine's chapter on Marxism in this volume.
3. See Stemplowska and Swift's chapter on ideal theory in this volume.
4. See Tomasi and Brenann's chapter on classical liberalism in this volume.
5. Pogge (2002) offers an important exception to this claim, although the normative assumptions on which he bases his institutional designs are weaker than full egalitarianism.
6. Arneson's (2000a, 340) formula, that "it is morally bad if some are worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own," is subject to the same objections posed here against Parfit and Temkin.

References

Anderson, Elizabeth. 2008. “Expanding the Egalitarian Toolbox: Equality and Bureaucracy.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 82:139–60.
WorldCat

Anderson, Elizabeth. 2010. *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Arneson, Richard. 2000a. “Luck Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism.” *Ethics* 110:339–49.
WorldCat

Arneson, Richard. 2000b. “Welfare Should be the Currency of Justice.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 30(4): 497–524.
WorldCat

Bobbio, Luigi. 2003. “Building Social Capital through Democratic Deliberation: The Rise of Deliberative Arenas.” *Social Epistemology* 17(4): 343–57.
WorldCat

Bowles, Samuel, Herbert Gintis, and Bo Gustafsson, eds. 1993. *Markets and Democracy: Participation, Accountability, and Efficiency*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Caney, Simon. 2005. *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Cohen, G. A. 1989. “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice.” *Ethics* 99:906–44.
WorldCat

Cohen, G. A. 2008. *Rescuing Justice and Equality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Darwall, Stephen. 2006. *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Dewey, John. 1981. “Three Independent Factors in Morals.” In *The Later Works, 1925–1953*. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. (Originally published 1930)
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Dworkin, Ronald. 1981. “What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10(4): 283–345.
WorldCat

Eley, Geoff. 2002. *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Esping-Anderson, Gøsta. 1990. *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Fraser, Nancy. 1997. “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Postsocialist’ Age.” In *Justice Interruptus*. By Nancy Fraser. New York: Routledge.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Fung, Archon, and Eric Olin Wright. 2003. *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovation in Empowered Participatory Governance*. London: Verso.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Godwin, William. 1793. *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*. London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Kant, Immanuel. 2002. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Kekes, John. 2007. *The Illusions of Egalitarianism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Kropotkin, Peter. 1917. *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. New York: Knopf.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

LaVaque-Manty, Mika. 2009. *The Playing Fields of Eton: Equality and Excellence in Modern Meritocracy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Mill, John Stuart. 1975. *The Subjection of Women*. Indianapolis: Hackett. (Originally published 1869)
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Moellendorf, Darrel. 2002. *Cosmopolitan Justice*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Orwell, George. 1937. *The Road to Wigan Pier*. London: V. Gollancz.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Paine, Thomas. 1792. *Rights of Man. Part the Second. Combining Principle and Practice*. London: H. D. Symonds.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

p. 57 Parfit, Derek. 2000. "*Equality or Priority?*" In *The Ideal of Equality*. Edited by Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams. New York: St. Martin's Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Pettit, Philip. 1997. *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Pogge, Thomas. 2000. "On the Site of Distributive Justice: Reflections on Cohen and Murphy." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29(2): 137–69.
WorldCat

Pogge, Thomas. 2002. *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge. MA: Harvard University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1761. *A Discourse upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind*. London: R. and J. Dodsley.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1988. *The Social Contract*. Translated by G. D. H. Cole. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books. Available from http://www.constitution.org/jjr/socon.htm. (Originally published 1762)
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Scanlon, Thomas. 2009. "When Does Equality Matter?" Unpublished paper, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Sen, Amartya. 1980. "Equality of What?" In *Tanner Lectures in Human Values*. Edited by S. M. McMurrin. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Temkin, Larry. 2003. "Egalitarianism Defended." *Ethics* 113: 764–82.
WorldCat

Thompson, William. 1996. *Appeal of One Half of the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men to Retain Them in Political and Thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery*. Edited by Dolores Dooley. Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press. (Originally published 1825)
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Walzer, Michael. 1983. *Spheres of Justice*. New York: Basic Books.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Wilkinson, Richard. 2005. *The Impact of Inequality: How to Make Sick Societies Healthier*. New York: The New Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Wollstonecraft, Mary. 1792. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Boston: Peter Edes.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC

Young, Iris Marion. 2000. *Inclusion and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Google Scholar Google Preview WorldCat COPAC