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Relational and Distributive Equality: A Difference of Temporal Concern?[1]

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ABSTRACT

The distinction between "relational" and "distributive" equality has come to play an important role in discussions of equality and justice. But the nature of the distinction is not as clear as we might hope. In this regard, Juliana Bidadanure makes an interesting and important proposal: the two views involve differing kinds of *temporal* concern. The distributive approach, she suggests, is concerned with equality over people's complete lives (diachronic equality), whereas the relational approach is concerned with egalitarian social relations at each moment in time (synchronic equality). I argue that this suggestion, while insightful, is not entirely satisfactory. Both relational and distributive equality, I demonstrate, may plausibly incorporate diachronic and synchronic aspects–although in distinctive ways. So, while the diachronic/synchronic distinction does not provide a clean cut between relational and distributive equality, examining the temporal aspects of each approach helps to illuminate their distinctiveness.

Keywords: equality, relational, social, distributive, diachronic, synchronic.

1. INTRODUCTION

Along with developing the theory of age-group justice, Juliana Bidadanure's work makes a useful contribution to our understanding of equality, shedding light on the distinctive commitments of "relational" and "distributive" notions of the ideal. In very rough terms, relational egalitarians are concerned with removing (particular kinds of) social hierarchies and realizing (particular kinds of) equal social relations,

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whereas distributive egalitarians are concerned with individuals enjoying equal amounts of a good such as welfare or resources. Whether and how these two views are distinct is still not as well understood as we might hope, however. There is substantial disagreement over the nature and importance of the distinction. On the one hand, some relational egalitarians claim that those in the distributive camp have, as it were, "missed the point" of equality (Anderson 1999). On the other hand, some distributive egalitarians claim that relational egalitarian concerns can be incorporated within the distributive approach by including "relational" goods among those to be distributed equally (Cordelli 2015; Gheaus 2018; Lippert-Rasmussen 2018b). Others, including Bidadanure, advocate a hybrid approach: they accept that there is an important difference between the two approaches, and seek to incorporate both of them into a general theory of justice (Bidadanure 2021; Moles and Parr 2019).

It is difficult, however, to assess these issues without a clear sense of what exactly characterizes the difference between relational and distributive equality. Here Bidadanure makes a novel and important proposal: the two approaches differ with regard to the temporal period taken to be relevant to assessments of justice. On the one hand, she suggests, the distributive approach is concerned with *diachronic* equality, or equality across an extended period of time—usually people's *complete lives*. On the other hand, the relational approach is concerned with *synchronic* equality, or equality at each particular moment in people's lives.

In this paper, I argue that this suggestion, while insightful, is not entirely satisfactory. Both relational and distributive equality, I demonstrate, may plausibly involve diachronic and synchronic aspects. Nonetheless, they do so in distinctive ways. So, while the diachronic/synchronic distinction does not provide a clean cut between relational and distributive equality, examining the temporal aspects of each approach illuminates their distinctiveness. The paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, I discuss the diachronic/synchronic distinction and Bidadanure's reasons for thinking that it helps to characterize the difference between relational and distributive equality. In section 3, I argue that there are some important distributive egalitarian concerns that are synchronic; and in section 4, I argue that there are some important relational egalitarian concerns that are diachronic. Section 5 concludes.

2. DIACHRONIC DISTRIBUTION AND SYNCHRONIC RELATIONS

The diachronic approach holds that in making judgments about egalitarian justice, we should not simply look at this or that moment in time. Instead, we must compare *segments* of time; and usually, the relevant segments are taken to be people's *complete lives*. Thus, even if two people possess an unequal amount of a good—say, resources—at a particular moment, they may nonetheless enjoy equality in the relevant sense if they have the same level of resources over their complete lives. It is possible, then, for two people to enjoy diachronic equality with regard to some good, even if they never enjoy the same level of that good at any point in time. In other words, diachronic equality is consistent with continual synchronic *in*equality.

The diachronic view has been the orthodox view in the literature on egalitarianism, with very few people raising challenges. Why so? The primary reasons, on Bidadanure's view (ch. 1), involve personal responsibility as well as a "common sense" notion of personal identity (for discussion, see Bou-Habib 2011; Lippert-Rasmussen 2019). Many theories of justice hold that differential exercises of responsibility can justify an unequal distribution of goods—if some work harder or make better choices, it is not unjust if they have more than others. Thus, synchronic inequalities may not be unjust if they reflect such facts. In order to make these kinds of judgments, though, we need to look at an extended period of time that encompasses the relevant differences (e.g. of effort and investment). In principle, the diachronic approach could be taken to apply to particular segments of people's lives and not to their lives as wholes. *A complete lives* approach, however, is standardly taken for at least two reasons: first, because people are assumed to be one and the same person over time (at least for the purposes of political morality); and second, because it is difficult to specify in a nonarbitrary way which temporal periods should be taken to be relevant.

Several philosophers have, however, raised challenges showing that the complete lives approach must be supplemented, if not rejected entirely. Consider the following examples:

> *Swapping Castes*: In a feudal society, two castes swap positions every twenty years. Caste 1 dominates Caste 2 for twenty years, then Caste 2 dominates Caste 1 for the subsequent twenty years, and then they switch again. At the end of their lives the two castes will have exerted equal amounts of control over each other. They will have been masters or slaves for their entire lives, but they will have been so equally. (Bidadanure 2021: 87; see also McKerlie 1989: 479)

> *Unequal City*: Consider a city where elderly people live in miserable and overcrowded retirement homes with little prospect for happiness while younger people live in lovely affluent residences. The older residents enjoyed the same happy lifestyles in their past, and the younger residents will end up in the same miserable homes when they themselves grow old. (Bidadanure 2021: 87; see also McKerlie 2012: 6)

These examples involve what has come to be called *changing-places egalitarianism*. Looking at each person's complete life, there is a sense in which all are equal, in virtue of people changing positions over time. But at any given point, there are serious inequalities, which Bidadanure takes to show that the complete lives view must be supplemented. In particular, she argues that in both cases there are objectionable kinds of relational inequality: we should object to the existence of an inferior caste, or to the stigmatizing and marginalized poor living conditions for the elderly—even if everyone gets the same treatment over their complete life (100-4). Thus, Bidadanure contends that these examples show that any diachronic complete lives approach must take into account synchronic relational egalitarian concerns as well.

I think Bidadanure is entirely right about this. What concerns me, however, is her further point that diachronic and synchronic concern are *distinctive* of distributive and relational equality respectively. She claims that

> the significant difference between relational and distributive approaches is that distributive egalitarians are restricted to complete lives as a segment for nonaccidental reasons that derive from the value of fairness. They have to look at the big (diachronic) picture before they set a judgment as to whether a given synchronic inequality may be concerning. At the other end, relational egalitarians do not have compelling reasons (like choice, responsibility, and compensation) to embrace the diachronic temporality as the most relevant. (102)

In what follows, I argue that this thought is too quick. On the one hand, I argue that there are important aspects of distributive equality that are synchronic, and so we have reason to object to some distributive inequalities, irrespective of "the big diachronic picture". On the other hand, relational egalitarians often do in fact have compelling reasons to look diachronically. In some cases, what might look like an objectionable relational inequality at a particular isolated moment may look otherwise from a diachronic perspective. These points, I believe, are important to examine in order to better understand the nature of the distinction between distributive and relational equality, and thus, more generally, the nature of egalitarian justice.

3. SYNCHRONIC DISTRIBUTIVE EQUALITY

As we've seen, the diachronic complete lives approach is taken by Bidadanure to "follow naturally" from the distributive approach because of a concern with personal responsibility. It is worth noticing, though, that this is not a claim about logical necessity. That is, it would be perfectly *coherent* to hold a synchronic view of distributive equality which required each person to have, say, exactly the same level of resources or welfare at each moment in time.[2] As many would agree, however, such a view would be implausible, precisely because it does not allow for differences due to personal responsibility.

But even if we accept that we should be concerned with *responsibility-sensitive* distributive equality, it does not follow that we are "restricted" to the complete-lives approach. On the contrary, I contend, those who endorse responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism have reason to endorse some important synchronic distributive requirements. Moreover, we will see, these synchronic requirements plausibly flow from the same fundamental concern—autonomy—that grounds concern with responsibility-sensitive distribution as well.

First, consider that several theorists, including Bidadanure, hold that the diachronic complete lives approach should be combined with a threshold of opportunity that must be met at every point of people's lives.[3] Drawing on Norman Daniels's work, Bidadanure endorses the following principle: "institutions must ensure that all age groups have enough to enjoy a normal range of opportunities at each and every stage of their life" (Bidadanure 2021: 56; see also Daniels 1988). Here the "normal range of opportunities" is relative to age—in the sense that it might be "normal" for different age groups to have more or less extensive, or least different opportunities available to them. This principle, however, does not allow people to fall below the threshold of age-relative normal opportunities at any stage of life, regardless of how extensive or valuable their opportunity set may be at other stages.[4] Thus, Bidadanure's view involves an important synchronic requirement: that each person has a normal range of

[2] Historically, this view was held by Gracchus Babeuf (Babeuf and Marechal 1997). For more recent defenses of outcome equality, see Phillips (2004, 2006).

[3] A view also held by Paula Casal (2007) and Axel Gosseries (2011). For discussion, see Bidadanure (2016: 252-3).

[4] One concern about this principle is the following. Suppose we need to perform a painful operation on a person in order to save their life, but doing so would bring them below the threshold of normal opportunities. Is it impermissible to perform the operation? A plausible response, it seems, would be to say that people are owed a set of "normal" opportunities because of their interest in autonomy; thus, it is permissible to go below the threshold of normal opportunities when doing so is necessary to maintain a person's capacity for autonomy, as in the imagined case.

opportunities at all times.[5]

Similarly, Paul Bou-Habib's account requires that "our fair lifetime shares are allocated over our lives such that either (a) we can always endorse our life plans or (b) we always have a decent set of opportunities at each stage of our lives" (Bou-Habib 2011: 305).[6] For Bou-Habib (2011: 303), either one of these conditions is sufficient for people to live *autonomously*.[7] Interestingly for our purposes, he argues that people's interests in leading autonomous lives take a *synchronic* rather than a diachronic form. He says:

> [We] do not lead autonomous lives by having our earlier selves make choices that affect and bind our later selves, independently of the attitude that our later selves have towards those choices, so that our whole life, or as much of it as possible, is the result of an early choice. Rather, what matters, for our autonomy, is that our lives are endorsed as they are lived, and that we continuously affirm our plans of life as we pass through all the stages of our lives. (Bou-Habib 2011: 303)

If distributive egalitarians are concerned, then, with people's equally important interests in living autonomously, then *with regard to these interests*, the diachronic approach seems inappropriate. Living autonomously requires that certain conditions are met at all times. This means, as Bou-Habib points out, that we do not live autonomously when we live bound to our former choices, whatever we come to think about those choices later on.

In addition, it does not seem to be the case that people can be compensated for the absence of autonomy at one stage of life with a greater degree of it at another stage. Consider a variation of Bou-Habib's case. Suppose we can assign a number, 0 through 5, that represents the extent to which a person can "live autonomously" at a particular time. At the lower end of the scale, "1", they have only the basic conditions of autonomy, with few opportunities and resources. At the upper end, "5", they have extensive opportunities and resources. A score of "0" means the basic conditions for autonomous living are not met. Suppose now that you can choose between two lives of equal length, A and B. In life A, you have an autonomy score of 2 for half your life, and 3 for the second half. In life B, you have an autonomy score of 5 for half of your life, and 0 for the other half.

[5] Bidadanure does not explicitly connect this concern with autonomy. But she does draw on Daniels's work within a Rawlsian framework, which involves a fundamental autonomy-based concern with people's "moral powers", as discussed below.

[6] Bou-Habib (2011: 294-5) criticizes the age-relative normal range of opportunities requirement on the basis that it is not *ambition-sensitive*.

[7] He suggests, further, that this concern is connected to dignity: "[a] person's dignity is protected at a given time when she can live in the light of her appreciation of value, and hence autonomously, at that moment in time."

Are A and B equally autonomous from the complete-lives perspective? On the one hand, aggregating across each life as whole, each receives a score of 5. But on the other hand, only *half* of life B is lived autonomously. With regard to autonomous living, then, there is a sense in which life A contains twice as much as B. Granted, half of life B involves more *valuable* autonomous living.[8] But intuitively this doesn't adequately compensate for the total absence of autonomy in the other half of the life. What this suggests, then, is that if autonomy is important, there is reason to distribute its basic conditions synchronically, at each stage of life.

This has implications for the distribution of the basic liberties. Consider, for instance, that John Rawls (1987) argues that people are owed an equal set of basic liberties because they "secure" the social conditions for the "full and effective" exercise and development of the "two moral powers". The two moral powers are closely connected to autonomy: they consist in the capacity to form, revise, and pursue a conception of the good and a sense of justice. The basic liberties—including freedoms of thought, speech, association, and the political liberties—play a central role in people's ability to develop these two moral powers, and so are required for autonomous living in this sense (Rawls 1987; Melenovsky 2018; Freeman 2007: 55-7).

Furthermore, the equal basic liberties are a *synchronic* egalitarian requirement: they are owed to people at each moment in time. It is important to note that the *worth* of these liberties, or what people are able to do with them, may vary between persons and over time, depending on people's abilities and resources.[9] But being denied a basic liberty altogether at one stage of one's life cannot be compensated by enjoying it at a high level of "worth" at another stage. To see this, consider a version of the *changing places* examples:

> *Unequal Speech*: imagine a society in which the elderly, and only them, are denied freedom of speech. As a result, suppose, the *worth* of

[8] We can distinguish having the conditions for autonomous living from the *value* of those conditions in a similar way to how Rawls distinguishes having a liberty from the *worth* of that liberty (see below). Having the conditions of autonomous living is—more or less—an on-or-off matter; either you have the conditions or you do not. But the *value* of those conditions, understood in terms of what they allow you to do, is scalar, and may be greater or lesser depending on your resources, opportunities, and so on.

[9] In more detail, Rawls defines the distinction as follows: the basic liberties are specified by institutional rights and duties that entitle citizens to do various things, if they wish, and that forbid others to interfere. The basic liberties are a framework of legally protected paths and opportunities. Of course, ignorance and poverty, and the lack of material means generally, prevent people from exercising their rights and from taking advantage of these openings. But rather than counting these and similar obstacles as restricting a person's liberty, we count them as affecting the worth of liberty, that is, the usefulness to persons of their liberties. (Rawls 1987: 4)

> freedom of speech for everyone else is greater than it would be if the elderly also had it; for example, because it is easier to have one's message heard and to influence others. Taking each person's life as a whole, people enjoy freedom of speech to the same extent.

Intuitively, this society is objectionable. A plausible explanation for this intuition is that freedom of speech is an important condition of autonomous living, and as such, should be enjoyed at every stage of life. Being able to express oneself freely and discuss with others is important for being able to form, revise, and pursue a conception of the good at any stage in life. And the fact that the elderly enjoyed freedom of speech at a high level of worth earlier in life (and at a higher level than if they had it at every stage) does not compensate for its outright denial later.

To be sure, there are other possible objections to the *Unequal Speech* case. It might be thought that the younger age-groups have autonomy-based interests in the elderly having freedom of speech, because the elderly's views are valuable, and may usefully inform one's conception of the good. While this thought is plausible, it does not show that the elderly do not also have an autonomy-based interest in their own freedom of speech. In addition, one might argue that it is actually *relational egalitarianism* that explains what is objectionable about the *Unequal Speech* case. Being denied freedom of speech socially downgrades the elderly and impedes their ability to relate to others as equals. More generally, we might think that the equal basic liberties are important in virtue of their functioning to give everyone in society a status as an equal citizen (Cass 2021). I think this objection rightly points out that there is a relational egalitarian concern at stake here. But again, this doesn't show that it is the only concern at stake. We might thus object to the *Unequal Speech* case on the grounds that it denies the elderly an important condition for autonomous living; *and* on the grounds that it socially downgrades them; a*nd* because deprives younger age-groups of valuable viewpoints.[10]

Concern with autonomy thus motivates some important synchronic requirements including a normal range of opportunities and an equal set of basic liberties. These synchronic requirements, moreover, may be regarded as flowing from the same fundamental value—autonomy—that motivates concern with responsibility-sensitive equal distribution as well. On several leading accounts, the reason why responsibility-sensitive equality matters involves people's interests in living autonomous lives of their own choosing (see discussion in Axelsen and Nielsen 2020:

[10] If relational equality were the *only* concern, it's not obvious we would have an objection to a society in which *everyone* was equally denied freedom of speech. After all, they would have an equal status in this regard.

659-61).[11]Ronald Dworkin (2002: 5-6), for example, regards two principles as fundamental. First, that people have equally important interests in their lives being "successful rather than wasted"; and second, that "one person has a special and final responsibility for that success—the person whose life it is".[12] Similarly, on Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen's (2015) view, the reason why (responsibility-sensitive) distributive justice matters is that it allows people to choose and pursue long-term goals that they noninstrumentally care about. Indeed, we might even think that concern with autonomy has become something of a platitude in theorizing about distributive justice in general—amounting, as David Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen (2020: 661, n. 6) suggest, to a "thicker" version of what Will Kymlicka calls the "egalitarian plateau".[13] Finally, as several theorists have argued, appealing to a fundamental concern with autonomy has several advantages for responsibility-sensitive egalitarians in terms of providing a response to the "harshness" objection and generating action-guiding implications (Williams 2013; Meijers and Vandamme 2019; Axelsen and Nielsen 2020).

4. DIACHRONIC RELATIONAL EQUALITY

We have seen, then, that responsibility-sensitive distributive equality involves both diachronic and synchronic aspects. Diachronically, it allows for differential exercises of responsibility to justify unequal distribution at particular points in time. Synchronically, though, responsibility-sensitive egalitarians have reason to hold that at all times people are owed the basic conditions of autonomy, which might be taken to include a set of basic liberties and a "normal" set of opportunities. Both of these requirements, we saw, may be grounded by the same fundamental concern with autonomy. I will now propose that relational equality has a similar structure. Synchronically, there exist basic requirements of relational equality that must be met at all times. Beyond these basic requirements, however, there are some relational inequalities at particular moments that may be just when assessed from a diachronic perspective.

To begin, consider how we might understand the notion of *diachronic* or *complete lives* relational egalitarianism. Lippert-Rasmussen (2019: 10) defines this notion in terms of the following claim: "justice requires that, from the perspective of their complete lives as a whole, people relate

[11] See the discussion in Axelsen and Nielsen (2020: 659-61). I take it that what they mean by "moral agency" could be described in terms of autonomy.

[12] See also the discussion in Axelsen and Nielsen (2020: 660).

[13] The "egalitarian plateau" involves the idea that that the principle that people should be treated with equal concern and respect is the starting point today for any political theory to be taken seriously. See Kymlicka (2002).

socially to one another as equals". He claims this means that

> whole lives relational egalitarianism … allows for changing-places relational egalitarianism; that is, you serve me for the first 40 years of our lives, I serve you for the last 40 years of my life, and we both know that this is how things are going to be. At no point in time are we 'misters' to one another, but at any given moment one is master and the other servant, but both know that things will change or were once different (and this colours our relation at any given point in time). (Lippert-Rasmussen 2019: 11)

Presumably, then, Lippert Rasmussen would also regard the *Swapping Castes* example above as compatible with complete-lives relational equality—at least if we assume that there is common knowledge that places will indeed be swapped.

Why, in these cases, should we think that people relate as social equals "from the perspective of their whole lives"? One explanation is the following. Suppose we assign a certain value or "power points" (say, 1) to each year a person gets to be a master. We may then conclude that since each person has an equal number of power points (40) over the course of their lives, they have an equal amount of the relevant "relational goods" (other things being equal). As such, they "relate as equals" from the perspective of their lives as wholes. This suggestion, then, holds that "relational goods" aggregate intrapersonally, similarly to resources or welfare.

I think we should reject this conclusion, however. In particular, we should reject the thought that because each person has 40 "power points" they thus relate as equals from the perspective of their complete lives. Relational egalitarians do not care about power in the sense that one's life goes better when they have it *over others*.[14] They care about *equal relations*. Notice, here, that many of the reasons to object to *enduring* unequal relations would appear to apply to the changing places case as well. For example, we might think that even though the places change, the nature of the master-servant relationship is such that it will damage the self-respect of the servant, encourage bad character traits such as servility and superciliousness, impede the full value of valuable relations such as friendship, and so on.[15] Thus, since no one *at any point* enjoys relations of equality, it seems strange to say that they enjoy relations of equality from the perspective of their complete lives.

[14] Part of the issue here, I think is, is that "relational goods" are being thought of in the terms of the distributive approach. For some helpful discussion, see David Axelsen and Juliana Bidadanure (2019: 339-41) on their rejection of "internalizing" strategy.

[15] See Tomlin (2014) for a helpful discussion.

One might reply, however, by pointing to the significance of the fact that each person *knows* that they will change places with the other, and that this "colours their relations at any given point". This "colouring" is what makes it plausible to say that they enjoy complete-lives relational equality, despite there being a master-servant relationship at each point. Why would common knowledge of trading places make the difference? For one, this common knowledge would inhibit either person from abusing their powers as master out of fear that, once their places are changed, the other would make them pay for it. In this way, common knowledge of changing places would impose costs on the master interfering with their servant—not unlike the way law inhibits interference by threat of punishment. Also, common knowledge of changing places might affect how each person regards themself and the other. Unlike master-servant relationships that endure indefinitely, the two people in the changing places case might not have reason to regard themselves as fundamentally inferior or superior to the other. Each person can think to themself: "I may be their servant now, but later I will be their master, and so we are fundamentally equals."[16]

Indeed, if these interference-inhibiting and self/other-regarding effects really do hold, and if they hold strongly, we might wonder about the sense in which one person really is a "master" and the other a "servant". Part of what constitutes a master-servant relationship, it seems, is the very fact that places do not change: as a result, the master can interfere without fear of later repercussions, and this shapes each party's notion of themself as fundamentally superior or inferior. In this sense, our paradigmatic notions of relational equality have diachronic dimensions. So, it might seem that the changing places case, properly understood, really involves a kind of continuous synchronic relational equality—unequal in name only.

Nevertheless, relational egalitarians may still find these kinds of relations objectionable. Suppose the master, as such, is permitted to interfere with some of the servant's basic liberties with impunity (e.g. the master can restrict the servant's movements, or determine who they can associate with). In this case, the master would dominate the servant, even if common knowledge of changing places inhibits them from actually interfering.[17] Relational egalitarians might still hold that this relationship

[16] By comparison, imagine a case in which every time the places change, each person has a kind of amnesia, forgetting that they were in a different place before, and unaware that they will swap places in the future. In this case, the interference-inhibiting effects and self/other regarding effects of changing places would not hold, and for that reason would seem to involve a worse kind of relational inequality. Thanks to Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen for suggesting this case to me.

[17] This concern is central to republicanism (Pettit 2012) and is shared by many relational egalitarians.

involves an objectionable kind of hierarchy, and does not adequately express respect for people's status as moral equals.[18] I agree, then, that the fact that there is common knowledge of changing places does indeed make a difference to the quality of social relations, and perhaps makes them less unequal than they would otherwise be. But there is still reason to think there exist serious relational inequalities at any given point—they are master and servant, after all—and so it seems mistaken to say they relate as equals "from the perspective of their lives as a whole". Thus, I think Bidadanure is right (or at least partially right): there are *some* aspects of relational equality that are essentially synchronic.

But there is, I think, a more compelling way to understand the notion of diachronic relational equality. Consider a case of changing places that involves a less serious relational inequality: two flatmates agree that one person will do all the housework for an entire year, but each year they switch places.[19] At each point there is a kind of relational inequality, it might seem, because one is "serving" the other. But it's a quite mild form and exists against a background of otherwise equal social relations. Neither dominates the other in the sense of being able to interfere with their basic liberties with impunity. Consider, further, that there may be common knowledge of a *rationale* behind the changing places agreement: suppose it is more efficient than if they equally shared housework duties at every point. The fact that there is consent and common knowledge of changing places, as well as a particular rationale, makes it seem plausible that they relate as equals from a diachronic perspective.

This suggests that we might understand diachronic relational equality as follows: at each point in time there are *some* ways in which no one should be inferior to another: none should be dominated or stigmatized (and so on), and all should enjoy the basic conditions of relational equality. However, the basic conditions of relational equality are compatible with *some other* relational inequalities at particular points in time, and taking a diachronic perspective allows us to judge that they are not objectionable. Consider that any plausible relational egalitarian ideal will need to accommodate *some* kinds of hierarchy or differences of power.[20] As Samuel Scheffler notes in an early discussion "differences of rank, power, and status are endemic to human social life", for example, in relations of "doctors to patients, teachers to students, parents to children, attorneys to clients, employers to employees, and so on" (Scheffler 2005: 17-18).

[18] For a discussion of the importance of this expressive dimension, see Schemmel (2021: ch. 2).

[19] Thanks to Tom Parr for this example.

[20] For some complementary considerations about diachronic relational equality involving personal responsibility, see Schmidt (2022).

If we were to consider any of these relationships purely synchronically, it might seem that they are objectionable from the standpoint of relational equality. They may, however, be compatible with relational equality understood diachronically. By looking at the larger diachronic picture we can judge whether the differences involved in these relationships communicate whether people have a fundamentally unequal status or are marked out as inferior/superior *as persons*. In the case of professional-client relations, for example, the greater powers held by the professional (e.g. attorney or doctor) need communicate only that they have a particular set of skills, and not that the client is an outright inferior. And when things go well, there will be common awareness that the relationship serves both party's interests. This will depend, though, on whether the professional's powers are circumscribed in the interests of the client and exist against a backdrop of otherwise equal relations.

Also, in the case of parents and young children, the greater power held by parents need not be taken to communicate that the child is inferior to the parent (cf. Lippert-Rasmussen 2018b: sec. 5.3). Given that the child knows they will come to have the same rights and powers as any adult, and that they might have similar powers over children of their own in the future, the inequality of power is not open to the same objections we have toward enduring relationships of unequal power. For example, the typical evils of unequal relations—like damage to self-respect and traits of servility/superciliousness—will not be present. It is important to note, however, that this does not mean that *any* inequalities of power between parents and children are acceptable from a diachronic relational egalitarian perspective. The ancient Roman law permitting fathers to kill their children at will, for example, is objectionable on relational egalitarian grounds—since it *does* communicate that the child is fundamentally inferior.[21] And we might still think that there is a live issue of whether children are owed more extensive nondomination and greater political participation than that provided by the status quo (Gheaus 2021; Umbers 2020). The point, instead, is that if we take the diachronic relational egalitarian perspective, we need not think that relations of equality need to obtain in exactly the same way as they do between adults.

[21] I do not mean to claim that this is the only, or even the most serious, objection to such a law. We might think that the most serious objection is that the child's right to life is not protected. Nevertheless, I maintain that there is *also* a concern of relational equality at stake. To see this, imagine two societies, both of which permit fathers to kill their children. In one society it is a matter of common knowledge; but in the other society, very few people know about the law. In both cases, children do not have a protected right to life. But in the first case, I submit, there is (or is more obviously) an objectionable social hierarchy.

5. CONCLUSION

The distinction between the diachronic and synchronic approaches does not neatly divide conceptions of equality that are concerned with social relations as opposed to responsibility-sensitive distribution. Both kinds of egalitarian concern, I have suggested, may plausibly involve diachronic and synchronic aspects. On the one hand, distributive egalitarians have reason to endorse some synchronic requirements; for instance, that all enjoy equal basic liberties and a decent set of opportunities. These requirements are grounded in a concern with people's autonomy, the same concern that plausibly motivates diachronic responsibility-sensitive distributive equality as well. On the other hand, relational egalitarians hold that no one should be marked out as fundamentally inferior to another, and that all have a status as equals. I have suggested that this ideal also involves basic synchronic requirements, e.g. at all times no one should be dominated. Further, however, I have argued that a diachronic perspective is needed to explain how a range of seemingly unequal relationships at particular points in time may be compatible with the relational egalitarian ideal.

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