Distributive equality, relational equality, and preferences about higher education[*]

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Abstract
Are scenarios in which disadvantaged students prefer not to attend (certain) universities a concern from the perspective of an egalitarian theory of justice? I consider this question from the respective perspectives of two prominent approaches to equality: distributive theories, which focus on the fairness of inequalities in outcomes, and relational theories, in which equality is conceived in terms of the relations among individuals. While distributive theorists seek to directly assess the fairness of distributions, relational theorists argue that our assessment of distributions must be guided by broader concerns of relational equality. As I suggest in this paper, this difference in approach is also reflected in the debate about justice and education, in particular in the context of the debate about whether justice in education requires some form of equality or, rather, as theorists such as Elizabeth Anderson and Debra Satz have suggested, 'adequacy'. I suggest that both distributive and relational theorists can identify as problematic that disadvantaged students prefer not to go to university (or certain universities), though they will have different interpretations of what precisely is problematic about the preference and how it relates to inequality of the relevant kind. However, this judgment is susceptible to the objection that it is counterintuitive that preferences that individuals endorse and identify with would be the source of unfair inequalities. In response, I argue that both distributive and relational egalitarians have good reason to challenge this objection; individuals' preferences, even if the individuals themselves endorse their preferences, should not fall beyond the purview of egalitarian theory. The final section returns to the theoretical debate between distributive and relational approaches to equality.

Keywords
luck egalitarianism, adequacy, relational equality, distributive equality, higher education access, equality, preferences

A variety of obstacles affect the higher education decisions of young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds. This includes obvious injustices, such as discrimination by universities, or secondary school systems that do not provide disadvantaged students with the qualifications necessary to compete for university places, but also more subtle obstacles, such as less knowledge about, and familiarity with, higher education among those from families without university experience.

In this paper, I consider cases where students *prefer* not to attend university, or prefer to attend less prestigious over more prestigious institutions. While preferences of this kind may seem a minor problem in the bigger scheme of inequality in higher education, the empirical literature suggests that they play a role in generating inequalities in higher education attendance. Moreover, the role that individual preferences and beliefs play in generating unequal outcomes is of concern not only in the higher education context but in other areas as well, for example choices about health-related behaviours, employment, which neighbourhood to live in, etc. The

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question of how egalitarian theories should respond to such preferences is therefore relevant beyond the education context. For egalitarians, it is also important to be able to provide an appropriate response to arguments to the effect that it is sufficient to ensure that opportunities are available to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, irrespective of whether such opportunities are taken up.

Are scenarios in which disadvantaged students prefer not to attend (certain) universities a concern from the perspective of an egalitarian theory of justice? Starting from a quote of a working-class student describing such a preference, I consider this question from the respective perspectives of two prominent approaches to equality: distributive theories, which focus on the fairness of inequalities in outcomes, and relational theories, in which equality is conceived in terms of the relations among individuals. While distributive theorists seek to directly assess the fairness of distributions, relational theorists argue that our assessment of distributions must be guided by broader concerns of relational equality. As I suggest in this paper, this difference in approach is also reflected in the debate about justice and education, in particular in the context of the debate about whether justice in education requires some form of equality or, rather, as theorists such as Elizabeth Anderson and Debra Satz have suggested, 'adequacy' of educational opportunities.

I argue that both distributive and relational theorists can identify as problematic situations in which disadvantaged students prefer not to go to university (or certain universities), though they will have different interpretations of the conditions under which such scenarios are problematic and what makes them problematic. However, this judgment is susceptible to the objection that it is counterintuitive that preferences that individuals endorse and identify with would be the source of unfair inequalities. In response, I argue that both distributive and relational egalitarians have good reason to challenge this objection; individuals' preferences, even if the individuals themselves endorse their preferences, should not fall beyond the purview of egalitarian theory. The final section returns to the theoretical debate between distributive and relational approaches.

I should flag a couple of caveats about this paper. First, the paper draws on real-world concerns and empirical examples from the UK. These examples may not full map on to contexts with different education systems and different issues around social class. Second, much of the paper is exploratory: I am interested in how distributive and relational theories of equality approach individual preferences. Relational egalitarians have said relatively little about individual preferences and the role they play in creating distributive inequalities. Distributive egalitarians, on the other hand, have discussed this issue in a lot of detail but the debate has proceeded in ways that, as I explain in more detail below, have been somewhat unhelpful and misleading. Finally, the paper forms part of a larger project on the relationship between distributive and relational approaches to equality. In particular, one of the goals for this project is to make the case for a pluralist conception of equality that gives weight to both distributive and relational considerations (I say more about the relationship between the two views in the next section). I cannot make the case for that conclusion here; however, reframing the debate around equality in education in light of this broader debate about equality illustrates that these two approaches can bring complementary perspectives to egalitarian debates about real-world issues.

Declining opportunities for higher education: distributive and relational concerns

Consider the following statement, made by a working-class student, describing his impression of Cambridge University, where he attended an admission interview:

> It was a complete shock, it was different from anywhere else I have ever been, it was too traditional, too old fashioned, from another time altogether. I didn't like it at all. It was like going through a medieval castle when you were going down the corridors. The dining room was giant long tables, pictures, it was like a proper castle, and I was thinking – where's the moat, where's the armour? Save me from this. You know, you expect little pictures with eyes moving around, watching you all the time. And I just didn't like the atmosphere, not one bit … All typical private school, posh people … posh and white. (Quoted in Ball, Davies, David, and Reay, 2002: 68).

The student was subsequently offered a place at Cambridge but declined.

Is this a problem of egalitarian justice? This case doesn't sit easily with (at least my) egalitarian intuitions. First, it seems plausible that the preference the student expresses will be costly to him: not going to university (or favouring less prestigious over 'snobbish' ones) is likely to leave the student worse off. 'Worse off' could mean different things here: it could be in terms of opportunities for high-paid employment, but also for work that's interesting, stimulating, self-directed, etc.[1] The student might also miss out on any intrinsic value that higher education has. Moreover, if the student does go to the university against which he has expressed a preference, he will also face a cost not faced by students who do not share this preference: attending an institution in which one feels out of place and alienated.[2] Thus, *irrespective of the choice he makes* (whether he ends up going to a posh university or not), the student has a preference that puts him at a disadvantage relative to students who are happy with old-fashioned, posh universities (for this reason I will call these preferences 'disadvantageous preferences'). It seems intuitively unfair that the student should have to bear these costs.

Second, the idea that people from disadvantaged backgrounds would explicitly seek to avoid interaction with people from better-off groups and that they think of higher education as 'not for them' (i.e. as not for people from their class background) has a distinctly inegalitarian flavour. In a society of equals, we might argue, social divisions should be less pronounced and interaction across social boundaries less problematic than seems to be the case for the student quoted above.

These two concerns mirror two different ways of thinking about equality in the literature on social justice: 'distributive' and 'relational' approaches to equality. Distributive conceptions draw attention to differences in outcomes (such as welfare or opportunities) and ask when inequalities in such outcomes are fair or unfair. One of the most prominent versions of distributive theory is arguably luck egalitarianism, which considers inequalities in the relevant metric unfair unless they can be justified with reference to choices that individuals should be held responsible for (Arneson, 1989; Cohen, 1989). Relational egalitarians have challenged the focus on distributive outcomes, emphasising that what really matters from the perspective of equality is how individuals relate to one another, particularly in their capacity as citizens. Proponents of relational egalitarianism have described their accounts as aiming for 'equality of status' (Miller, 1997), 'social equality' (Scheffler, 2003; 2015) and 'democratic equality' (Anderson, 1999; 2010a). The kinds of phenomena that relational approaches single out as problematic typically include status hierarchies, oppression and stigmatisation of particular individuals or groups. A 'society of equals', then, cannot be defined in terms of distributions but must instead aim for all citizens' equal status as members of the community.

Parts of the debate about equality in education have played out in terms of a disagreement between proponents of equality (Brighouse and Swift, 2009; Koski and Reich, 2006) and adequacy (Anderson, 2007; Satz, 2007). However, framing this debate as a debate between equality and adequacy (or between egalitarian and sufficientarian conceptions of distributive justice)[3] obscures the centrality that concerns of (relational) equality play in some of the arguments for adequacy in education. Elizabeth Anderson's and Debra Satz's accounts are explicitly motivated by a concern for equal status and equal membership in democratic societies. As Satz explains, her account sets out to

> undermine the sharp contrast usually drawn between adequacy and equality as goals of educational reform and to offer reasons in support of an egalitarian conception of adequacy. On my view, a certain type of equality—civic equality—is actually internal to the idea of educational adequacy for a democratic society. An education system that completely separates the children of the poor and minorities from those of the wealthy and middle class cannot be adequate for such a society. Educational adequacy, on my view, is tied to the requirements of equal citizenship… (Satz, 2007: 625)

Similarly, Anderson notes that

> the egalitarian goal is to create a society in which all of its members stand in relations of equality to one another in the major institutions of civil society, especially at work and in civic activities. … These goals set a minimum threshold of acceptable educational outcomes that varies with the general level of attainment in society. (Anderson, 2007: 619-620)

Proponents of adequacy in education, then, are not necessarily concerned with establishing any kind of distribution of educational or other opportunities *for its own sake* (that is, they are not distributive egalitarians, in the way I am using the term here): for relational egalitarians, distributions (irrespective of whether they meet requirements of equality or sufficiency) are not *in themselves* important. Rather, distributions matter insofar as they contribute to, or detract from, relational equality. Any argument for a particular distributive pattern must be based on how that pattern contributes to relational (not distributive) equality (Scheffler, 2003; Schemmel, 2011, 2012). In this paper, I view the debate about education as part of the larger debate between distributive and relational egalitarians. To the extent that proponents of 'adequacy' are motivated by concerns for relational equality, this suggests a somewhat different perspective about what is — and what is not — at stake between proponents of 'equality' and 'adequacy' in the education debate.

While there is, as the debate acknowledges, significant overlap in what the two approaches require when it comes to education, the reasons they propose for endorsing similar requirements will differ. There is also scope for the two approaches to come apart: On the one hand, to ensure the goals of relational equality, such as equal status and equal membership in the political community, it need not be necessary to eradicate all inequalities in educational and other outcomes; this may leave distributive egalitarians worried that relational theories are not sufficiently demanding in their requirements when it comes to inequalities in educational opportunities (e.g. Koski and Reich, 2006). On the other hand, equality in educational opportunities may not capture everything that matters for ensuring equal citizenship, leaving relational egalitarians worried that central aspects of an egalitarian education system — such as diversity (Anderson, 2007: 597) — might not be captured by a purely distributive account.

What might we say, from these two perspectives, about the student statement quoted above? Neither distributive nor relational egalitarians must, I think, *necessarily* describe this scenario as problematic. From a (responsibility-sensitive) distributive perspective, a situation where an agent is worse off than others because she declined an opportunity that was offered to her seems like a paradigmatic case of unproblematic inequality: if working-class people don't *want* to go to university, then whatever disadvantages they face as a result of not going are not unjust. From a relational perspective, whatever disadvantage the student faces as a result of his preferences would be of concern only if it negatively affects relational equality, for example by undermining his status as an equal; we would be worried about the student's statement only if it reflected, or contributed to, relational inequality and, at least on the face of it, it is not clear that this is the case. In the remainder of this paper, I want to suggest that both distributive and relational approaches, on at least some interpretations, can capture, in different ways, that there is a problem here.

Before I continue, a brief comment on the relationship between distributive and relational approaches. Relational views have emerged in response to distributive theories of equality, which seek to assess directly the fairness of distributions (e.g. of opportunities, welfare, or some other equalisandum). Relational egalitarians are typically critical of such views and propose relational views as an alternative to distributive approaches. Distributive and relational positions are thus often seen as incompatible (Anderson, 2010a, is perhaps the most explicit example of this). This way of conceptualising the relationship between distributive and relational approaches strikes me as problematic and in need of further argument.[4] For the purposes of this paper, I assume that it is possible to adopt a view of equality that gives weight to both relational and distributive perspectives as identifying different aspects of equality. To my mind, the case discussed in this paper illustrates the advantages of reconciling these two perspectives. The final section returns to this question.

Distributive equality and disadvantageous preferences

What, then, might a distributive egalitarian have to say about the student quoted above and the disadvantages he may face as a result of his preferences? What might luck egalitarians say about inequalities that result from individuals' preferences (and their influence on people's choices): should they count as 'brute luck' (to the extent that they are beyond individual control, for example because they are due to how someone was socialised) or as 'option luck' (because people make choices)? As I argue in this section, it is certainly possible for luck egalitarians to argue that, to the extent that the student ends up worse off than others, there is indeed an unfair inequality here. In fact, Richard Arneson and G.A. Cohen have developed interpretations of luck egalitarianism that are amenable to this conclusion. In their accounts, this argument can be made on the basis of two, somewhat different, grounds.

First, we can argue that there is an objective feature that characterises choices for which individuals should be held responsible, such as their 'voluntariness' or 'genuineness', where these notions are taken to exclude the influence of brute luck. Arneson[5] tends to emphasise the notion of voluntariness and notes that the question of whether we should compensate someone for disadvantages resulting from an expensive preference

> turns on whether the preference was acquired in a substantially voluntary or substantially involuntary way. If the expensive preference was deliberately chosen [by the agent], or if his acquisition of it was a foreseeable by-product of a voluntarily chosen course of action, there is no case for redistribution... (Arneson, 1990: 184)

Similarly, Cohen's account focuses on what he calls 'genuine choice'. He suggests that, on his interpretation, equality requires that we think about people's 'genuine choice' (Cohen, 1989: 934) and that 'genuine choice contrasts with brute luck' (Cohen, 1989: 931).

From this perspective, we would have to ask whether the preference our student expresses is 'voluntary' or 'genuine' in the required sense. While people can, of course, influence the preferences they develop to at least some extent, many factors beyond our control shape our preferences. In the case of young adults, moreover, it seems plausible to argue that because of their age, they would have counted as sufficiently mature to make voluntary choices only for a very limited time, so they cannot be regarded as responsible for the preferences they express.

A second consideration that is emphasised in Arneson's and Cohen's accounts is that choices can justify unequal outcomes only if they are made against equal background conditions. Cohen, for example, notes that '[p]eople's advantages are unjustly unequal (or unjustly equal) when the inequality (or equality) reflects unequal access to advantage, as opposed to patterns of choice against a background of equality of access' (Cohen, 1989: 930). Similarly, on Arneson's account,

> An opportunity standard of distribution leaves room for final outcomes to be properly determined by individual choices for which individuals are responsible, so that some inequalities of welfare are not even prima facie injustices because the inequalities arise by way of individual voluntary choice from an initial situation in which opportunities for welfare are fairly distributed. (Arneson, 1990: 175)

What would the equal background consideration imply for the luck egalitarian's assessment of preferences? To return to the student's statement cited earlier, we can argue that, to the extent that the preference the student expresses – i.e. a dislike for posh institutions – is a result of the unequal background in which he grew up, luck egalitarians can worry about the inequalities resulting from this preference. Disadvantages resulting from this preference – e.g. losing out on a higher salary or a loss in well-being when attending a university in which one feels out of place – would then be unfair.

Luck egalitarians, then, can argue that our student is not responsible for the preference he expresses (and that it would be unfair for him to bear any costs associated with it), either because the preference is not sufficiently voluntary, or because it reflects unequal background conditions.[6]

Rethinking the debate with the student quote in mind also gives us a different perspective on how the issue of preferences and their influence on distributive outcomes has been dealt with in the literature. In the debate around luck egalitarianism, this question has been discussed primarily within the debate about 'expensive tastes' — that is, tastes that make it such 'that it costs more to provide [the person who has them] than to provide others with given levels of satisfaction' (Cohen, 2004: p. 6). Examples of such tastes include a love for opera and an aversion to tap water (Dworkin, 2002: p. 288). Expensive tastes have been used in the 'equality of what?'-debate to test our intuitions about which metric should be used to compare people's distributive outcomes. Specifically, proponents of resource metrics suggest that the subjective[7] welfarist's willingness to compensate individuals for expensive tastes is counterintuitive and embarrasses the welfarist approach (Dworkin, 1981; Schaller, 1997). Welfarists, in response, have tried to strengthen the intuitive case for compensation for (at least some) expensive tastes (e.g. Cohen, 1999; 2004).[8]

Disadvantageous preferences are similar to expensive tastes in that, like expensive tastes, they are preferences that can lead to inequalities in outcomes. A dislike for snobbish universities is 'disadvantageous' in the sense that this preference makes the agent less likely to apply to, or accept an offer from, a university perceived as such, thus foregoing any benefits associated with a degree from that kind of institution, or — if he does go — his preference is likely to mean that he will be worse off than his peers without this preference.

Reconsidering the debate in light of the argument presented in the previous sections highlights a number of problematic aspects of that debate. First, the debate falsely assumes that the problem of preferences can be settled by an appropriate choice of egalitarian metric. While the issue of expensive tastes is usually brought forward in the currency debate as a putative embarrassment for the welfarist position and in support of resourcist positions, the problem of disadvantageous preferences creates a problem for both welfarists and resourcists. What makes a disadvantageous preference problematic is that it leads individuals to make choices that leave them worse off than others, *whatever our metric*. Our student may end up with a lower salary (i.e. he will be worse off in terms of resources) but he may also end up with less interesting, stimulating or otherwise desirable positions; this would leave him worse off in terms of welfare. Much of the expensive tastes debate assumes that the question of how luck egalitarians must deal with individuals' preferences affects only, or primarily, their choice of metric; however, as the notion of disadvantageous preferences suggests, deciding on a metric does not settle this question.[9]

Second, the focus on expensive tastes has encouraged a skewed treatment of preferences within the context of distributive justice. Critics of (subjective-welfarist interpretations of) luck egalitarianism often assume that expensive tastes must be 'trivial' (Arneson, 2000b: 513) or 'champagne tastes' (Dworkin, 1981: 228), and that compensation for individuals' preferences must involve indulging those who are 'spoiled' by their privileged backgrounds (e.g. Schaller, 2000).[10] The student case suggests a somewhat different picture: background inequalities can affect preferences such that individuals' choices are likely to replicate or deepen these inequalities. Being sensitive to such effects may not only be consistent with but in fact required by an egalitarian theory of justice.

Finally, the debate around expensive tastes is sometimes seen, even by theorists sympathetic to compensation for such tastes, as having little import for the real world. Cohen, for example, notes that

> each person's satisfaction function will likely be an amalgam of cheap and expensive tastes, and few may have expensive tastes in an aggregate sense… This fact is relevant to practical politics. It is certainly a reason for not worrying too much, in many practical contexts, about compensating people for expensive tastes. (Cohen, 2004: 6)

Thus, even though they raise interesting philosophical questions, '[e]xpensive tastes may be peripheral to the *practice* of justice' (Cohen, 2004: 7, emphasis in original).

This assessment, however, seems overly optimistic. It may well be the case that unequal background conditions help create preferences that then make it more likely that individuals make choices that reproduce existing inequalities. We can see one such mechanism at work in the student quoted above, and the empirical evidence suggests the unequal brute luck systematically influences the young adults' preferences about higher education (Voigt, 2007). Thus, while much of the expensive tastes debate has proceeded with reference to abstract and unrealistic examples, the issue at stake – how must a theory of distributive justice respond to individuals' preferences? – is very relevant to the real world.

Relational equality and disadvantageous preferences

What might we say from the perspective of relational equality about the student quote? To recall, relational egalitarians focus on the character of the relations between individuals. Distributive inequalities, for them, are not in and of themselves problematic. For a relational egalitarian, it would therefore not be enough to simply point to the disadvantage faced by the student and describe it as unfair.

In contrast to the luck egalitarian position I sketched in the previous section, relational egalitarians typically do not accept that the influence of social background on people's choices (and the inequalities to which that may lead) should necessarily be considered problematic. As Satz argues,

> even in a just society… there will be a variety of lives, and the lives people choose will inevitably be influenced by their social and cultural backgrounds. … The response to this fact is surely not that all such influences are problematic. Our cultural and social backgrounds help make us who we are. Fair equality of opportunity cannot reasonably be aimed at every difference in outcome between individuals, even with respect to those differences in life prospects that are socially influenced. (Satz, 2012:161)

Rather, inequalities in outcomes would become problematic if they are inconsistent with relational equality. Anderson (2010b: 18) suggests three different ways in which inequalities in outcomes become problematic from a relational perspective. First, inequalities in distributions can be unjust if they *embody* unjust social relations; male-only franchise, for example, embodies unjust relations between men and women. Second, some distributions cause unjust relations. Relational equality requires that distributions (a) ensure all citizens' equal membership (e.g.

enough food, decent clothes to appear in public, wheelchair-accessible public buildings) and (b) ensure fair opportunities for all citizens to develop their talents. Finally, inequalities in distributions can be *caused* by unjust relations, for example as a result of group discrimination or other forms of unjust treatment. These different connections between relational equality and distributions are reflected in how relational egalitarians have approached education.

Sufficient opportunity for higher education

First, as Anderson argues, relational equality requires that

> the state provides educational opportunities sufficient to ensure that any child from any social background who has the potential to succeed at the university level will be able to qualify herself for university, if she expends a normal (not extraordinary) effort to do so. (Anderson, 2004:108)

However, this would not capture the inequality faced by the student I quoted at the beginning of the paper. The student certainly has the opportunity to go to an elite university. A distributive egalitarian might argue that this is not an *equal* opportunity; for relational egalitarians, however, opportunities can be fair without being equal. From a purely relational perspective, we would need further argument if we wanted to conclude that the student, because of his preference, did not have a fair opportunity to go to an elite university.

Ensuring equal membership

Second, a relational egalitarian could argue that education should contribute to everyone's becoming an equal member of the political community. As Anderson explains, this has various implications for what relational equality requires when it comes to primary and secondary education but it is less clear that this has implications for higher education:

> The egalitarian goal is to create a society in which all of its members stand in relations of equality to one another in the major institutions of civil society, especially at work and in civic activities. … it requires that each person have enough to function as an equal in society—to fulfill a respected role in the division of labor, participate in democratic discussion, appear in public without shame, and enjoy equal moral standing to make claims on others. These goals set a minimum threshold of acceptable educational outcomes that varies with the general level of attainment in society. In developed societies, more than basic literacy and numeracy is required to hold one's own in interactions with others, whereas this would not be required in a society where literacy is rare and few jobs require it. I suggest that in the developed world attainment of a high school diploma or its equivalent, representing real twelfth-grade-level achievement, is necessary for equal standing. (Anderson, 2007: 619-620)

On Anderson's account, then, in industrialised countries everyone needs to complete secondary education in order to participate as an equal; attending university, however, is not required. Thus, someone's decision not to attend university would not undermine their equal status so understood; this concern therefore does not give us reason to worry about the student's preference, even if it leads him to decide not to go to university at all.

Higher education and diversity

A different concern relational egalitarians could emphasise is that preferences such as those described by the student help prevent diversification of student bodies, which in turn is central to ensuring the kind of social and political elite required for a society of equals. This concern is central to Anderson's (2007) argument that a society of equals requires that social and political elites have an understanding of, and are responsive to, the needs of disadvantaged groups. For this reason, she argues, elites need first- or second-hand knowledge of the problems and interests of the disadvantaged. This can only happen if membership in these elites is drawn from all social groups and if members of different groups are educated together:

> Segregation makes the privileged insular, clubby, smug, and filled with an excessive sense of their own entitlement. It makes them ignorant of the less advantaged and their lives, neglectful of the often disastrous consequences their decisions wreak on them, uncomfortable interacting with them, and consequently unaccountable and irresponsible. In a democratic society, in which those occupying positions of responsibility and privilege are expected to serve the interests of people from all walks of life, and not simply the interests of a privileged class, these qualities entail that the privileged are *incompetent*. To enable them to competently engage in respectful intergroup communication with those less privileged than themselves requires the construction and transmission of *new* forms of cultural capital forged through cooperative interaction on terms of equality of members of all salient social groups in society… Schools must be comprehensively integrated to create and transmit this vital form of cultural capital. (Anderson, 2012: 125, emphasis in original)

Relational egalitarians thus have an independent argument against socially divided educational institutions and for ensuring that in higher education in general and elite institutions in particular, students come from different social groups.

Again, though, this argument only gets us so far. Once representation of disadvantaged individuals in the relevant institutions is sufficient to ensure that elites have the kinds of capacities Anderson emphasises, then any one disadvantaged student's decision not to attend a particular university, or to abstain from higher education altogether, no longer matters. The concern about competent elites that understand and are responsive to the needs of everyone, including the disadvantaged, can be met even if some members of the disadvantaged decline opportunities to attend (prestigious) universities. Thus, while relational egalitarians would worry if a significant proportion of working-class students feels sufficiently apprehensive about posh universities to decline their offers, they would not need to worry about individual students declining such offers, once sufficient diversity has been attained.

Distorted preferences

A further question relational egalitarians might ask about our student is whether the preference he expresses is related to unjust treatment. As Anderson notes, inequalities in outcomes that reflect unjust relations would be problematic from the perspective of relational equality. Unjust treatment might enter the picture in (at least) two ways. First is the issue of preferences that have been distorted by oppression or other kinds of social injustice. For example, if conditions of oppression or injustice make it the case that even accepted applicants did not think they deserved to be at the institution that selected them, or they do not feel that they would be able to succeed in that environment because oppression has crushed their self-confidence. Such concerns seem congenial to the relational approach. As Satz suggests, one of the ways in which socialisation influences become problematic is when they are ‘predicated on, or support, ideas of the unequal worth of persons’ (Satz, 2012: 161).

This argument is important and certainly allows us to capture a range of problematic scenarios where individuals decline opportunities. However, it is less clear that this argument captures the problem at hand. There doesn’t seem to be anything obviously distorted about the preference that the students expresses, at least in the sense that we typically think about distorted preferences: he is, we can plausibly assume, correct in his assessment about the poshness of the institutions he is considering and his ability to ‘fit in’ there.

A second possibility along similar lines is for relational egalitarians to argue that what makes the case problematic is that the student anticipates unequal treatment. For example, he might expect that his posh university peers would treat him with disdain because of his working-class background. Again, relational theories can fairly straightforwardly capture concerns about unequal treatment of this kind: if the student avoids certain interactions because he is concerned that he will not be treated as an equal, then this would certainly raise relational concerns.

Anderson discusses this kind of concern in the context of black ‘self-segregation’ in the US:

> Some black self-segregation is due to ethnocentrism. Many blacks express pride in controlling their own communities and feel more at home in black-majority neighborhoods… However, the obverse of this is that they *do not feel at home*, *but rather unwelcome*, in majority-white neighborhoods. *Fear of white hostility* is a more important factor than ethnocentrism in explaining black residential choices. Thus, while some black self- segregation is voluntary, white antipathy toward blacks makes integration an unattractive option for them. This kind of voluntary choice does not justify the restricted range of options blacks face. (Anderson, 2010, p. 70, emphases added)

As Anderson explains, fear of hostility and being made to feel unwelcome in particular neighbourhoods would be captured by a relational framework. Disadvantages that individuals face as a result of such concerns, even when they could in some sense be construed as mediated by ‘voluntary choice’, would then be considered unfair by a relational account.

It is less clear whether our student’s concerns are of a similar kind. He might, of course, be concerned about being treated as less than equal – this could, following Anderson, be captured within a relational account. However, the student’s concern might be that he wouldn’t fit in, that he wouldn’t be able to meet people who share his interests and perspective, etc. It is not clear that this kind of sentiment is easily captured by relational accounts as they currently stand. Anderson, in the passage just quoted, mentions the possibility that blacks choose not to live in majority-white neighbourhoods because they ‘do not feel at home’ but she links this sentiment quite closely to the expectation of hostility. It is not clear whether Anderson would also consider problematic self-segregation that reflects not so much fear of hostility but rather a sense that one will stand out and not quite fit in in particular neighbourhoods. In both scenarios – self-segregation by blacks and the student’s decision not to attend a prestigious university – there is, I think, a strong case for seeking to interpret relational equality so as to capture as problematic this kind of sentiment. I explore this possibility in the next sub-section.

Attitudes and preferences in a society of equals

A somewhat different way to think about the student and the preference he expresses is to focus, not on the outcomes to which it leads, but rather on the *content* of that preference. Would relational egalitarians object to some people's explicitly avoiding interaction with members of other social groups? The fact that someone wants to avoid sustained interaction with particular social groups and sees particular institutions as 'for' people from a certain social group is, a relational egalitarian might want to argue, an *indicator* of relational inequality, irrespective of any distributive inequalities it also leads to.

In order to capture this idea, relational egalitarians would have to adopt two positions: first, that individuals' attitudes towards others fall within the purview of relational equality and, second, that relational equality applies not only at the political level but also to individuals' private interactions.

Consider first the distinction between the requirement that people *treat* one another as equals (for example by giving their interests appropriate weight in collective decision-making) and the requirement that they *regard* one another as equals. These two ideas can come apart: I can treat someone as an equal (at least in a formal sense) without actually thinking of them as my equal.[11] Interpretations of relational equality in the literature often mention both of these ideas but do not clearly specify whether their proposed theory of equality is meant to apply at the level of behaviours, attitudes, or both.

Requirements of equal treatment might not capture problematic attitudes such as that implicit in statements by advantaged groups when it comes to their desired proximity to disadvantaged groups. Consider statements of the sort, 'I don't mind Black people/immigrants/Muslims/gay people, but I don't want them to live next to me'. This kind of attitude is (at least in theory) compatible with treating members of these groups as equals and not wanting to deny them equal membership in the community. Nonetheless, these seem to be precisely the kinds of attitudes that — at least to my mind — would make a society inegalitarian in an important sense. If relational egalitarians share this sentiment and want their theory of equality to capture it, they will have to explicitly include attitudes and preferences within their definition of what makes a society a society of equals. If this is the case, relational egalitarians should not be satisfied with individuals' actions meeting certain requirements of treating others as equals (however they are going to be fleshed out) but should also consider that a society of equals could have requirements for how citizens *regard* one another and what attitudes they have towards others, independently of how they behave towards them.

Second, relational egalitarians would have to extend the locus of relational equality beyond the political sphere to also include the private sphere (see also Lippert-Rasmussen, 2016, chapter 7). While this question has, to my knowledge, not been addressed explicitly in the literature, different relational egalitarians seem to take different positions regarding the scope of relational egalitarianism. Scheffler (2015) understands relational equality as primarily applying at the political level but his interpretation of egalitarian political relations also draws on what we might say about egalitarian personal relationships. Other relational egalitarians seem more open to the idea of including personal relationships within the scope of relational equality, including our willingness to interact with members of different social groups. Miller, for example, suggests that in a society that meets requirements of social equality, people 'choose their friends according to common tastes and interests rather than according to social rank' (Miller, 1997: 232). Similarly, in her account of racial inequality, Anderson (2010b: 16-17) suggests that 'the relational theory of inequality locates the causes of economic, political, and symbolic group inequalities in the relations (processes of interaction) between the groups' and then defines 'relation' as a 'mode of conduct—a practice or habit in accordance with a principle, rule, process, or norm— by which one party interacts with (*or avoids*) the other party…' (emphasis added). Finally, Schemmel (2011) discusses a scenario in which middle-class parents discourage their children from playing with children from poor backgrounds, noting that 'it is hard to deny that children from poorer backgrounds (and their parents) are, in such cases, treated in ways that make clear to them that they are socially inferior' (2011: 383).

Including both people's attitudes and the private sphere within the purview of relational equality strikes me as an attractive way of interpreting relational equality. On such an account, individuals' preferences such as that expressed by the student can be seen as possible indicators of relational equality – in the student's case, we might be concerned that he expresses a sense that certain institutions are seen as not 'for' people from certain social groups and an unwillingness to associate with people from other social groups. It is of course very different for a member of a disadvantaged group to express such attitudes than for a member of a disadvantaged group: the student's statement is certainly very different from the sentiment cited earlier ('I don't mind Black people/immigrants/Muslims/gay people, but I don't want them to live next to me'). However, from a relational perspective, such attitudes can serve as *indicators* of relational inequality, irrespective of whether they are expressed by the advantaged or the disadvantaged.

While relational egalitarians have not addressed this explicitly, it seems that at least some proponents of the theory seem open to extending their account in these ways. This would not mean (and it doesn't follow) that relational egalitarians should want to police people's thoughts or seek to restrict people's associational liberties. It would mean, however, that we should consider an unwillingness to associate with people beyond particular social boundaries as an indicator of (at least some degree of) relational inequality. I take up the broader question of how theories of equality (distributive and relational) should respond to people's preferences in the next section.

Equality and individual preferences

So far, my concern has been to argue that, if interpreted in particular ways, both distributive and relational views about equality can capture the intuition that there is something problematic about the student statement quoted at the beginning of the paper. Of course, not everyone will share the intuition that there is indeed something problematic here. One concern we might have about the interpretations of distributive and relational equality I sketched in the previous sections is that they allow for the possibility that preferences that individuals identify with and consider central to their conception of the good become sources of unfair inequality.

In the literature on distributive equality, Ronald Dworkin has developed this concern in a lot of detail and in this section, I will focus on his argument. However, in the relational literature, too, such concerns are sometimes voiced. For example, Satz is concerned that 'who we are' cannot be the source of unfair inequality: 'Fair equality of opportunity … does not condemn all socially generated inequalities: some of these inequalities are not sources of disadvantage; some of these socially generated differences make us *who we are*' (Satz, 2012: 164, emphasis added).

Dworkin argues that any acceptable conception of equality must cohere with the ethical judgements we make in our personal lives (Dworkin, 1990: 17). This is inconsistent with a view of equality according to which preferences are seen as a matter of luck:

> We … do not count the fact that we have reached some particular moral or ethical conclusion as a matter of good or bad luck. That would be to treat ourselves as dissociated from our personalities rather than identified with them – to treat ourselves as victims bombarded by random mental radiation. We think of ourselves differently – as moral and ethical agents who have struggled our way to the convictions we now find inescapable. (Dworkin, 2002: 290)

On Dworkin's account, inequalities can be unfair if and only if individuals could, coherently, in their own lives, ask for compensation for the disadvantage they are facing. Disadvantages that arise from beliefs, judgements and the preferences we endorse do not meet this criterion: we cannot, Dworkin suggests, coherently think that the preferences we endorse and identify with in the required sense are a matter of luck to us, or as something that could be beyond our responsibility and for which we should be compensated.

On Dworkin's account, drawing the line between preferences for which individuals are owed compensation (which he calls 'cravings') and those for which egalitarians should not compensate requires that we consider the agent's attitude towards the preference in question. Preferences that agents should be held responsible for are preferences that follow our considered judgements about which things have independent value (Dworkin, 2002: 293) and fit within the complex system of other beliefs and judgements a person holds (Dworkin, 2002: 291). Perhaps most important to Dworkin's account is what has been called the 'endorsement test' (Clayton, 2000: 73): If we would choose to maintain a preference even if given the option to be relieved of that preference (Dworkin often uses the image of offering a costless pill that would rid us of the preference in question), then this is a preference we should be held responsible for. In Dworkin's terms: 'a "taste" is a handicap if one would prefer not to have it' (Dworkin, 2004: 392).

What would this mean for the disadvantages faced by the student quoted above? Dworkin would have us approach this situation by asking whether the student endorses the preference (a dislike for snobby universities): only if he would prefer not to have this preference is there a case for saying that any resulting disadvantage is unfair.

One natural response to Dworkin's argument is to suggest that we simply reframe the problem. When it comes to the student, we could argue that the source of disadvantage is not the preference itself but the context in which the student must choose — it is that context (where degrees from posh universities come with distinct advantages) that makes the preference expensive. Cohen has suggested a response along these lines to Dworkin's concerns. The bad luck, Cohen suggests, is not the preference itself but that the preference *happens to be expensive* (Cohen, 2004). The problem Dworkin describes doesn't arise if we think of the student as asking for compensation for the fact that his dislike for snobbish universities comes at a cost, rather than the preference itself.

However, there are a couple of further points to make in response to Dworkin's argument to challenge the discomfort with the idea of individuals' endorsed preferences as sources of unfair inequality. First, our intuitions about preferences are, I think, less clear-cut than Dworkin acknowledges. People can, and do, take responsibility for their preferences while at the same time acknowledging external influences on their beliefs and convictions. We do think of ourselves, as Dworkin suggests, as 'moral and ethical agents who have struggled our way to the convictions we now find inescapable' (Dworkin, 2000: 290). This, however, does not prevent us from acknowledging that what we did in the end come to believe was affected by various factors of our environment, such as our upbringing, education, specific experiences and so forth.[12] While we have both of these intuitions – feeling responsible for our preferences and recognising the way in which these were affected by external influences – Dworkin's argument seems to pay little attention to the latter. Even if we accept, then, Dworkin's suggestion that there must be continuity between the judgements we make in our ethical lives and those we make in the political sphere, it is not clear that Dworkin's approach actually achieves such continuity.

Second, Dworkin notes that 'liberal equality depends on a sharp and striking distinction between personality and circumstance' (Dworkin, 1990: 39) and suggests that factors that constitute part of our personality cannot be the source of unfair inequality. This, however, is only one possible interpretation of the basic luck egalitarian claim that we must distinguish inequalities depending on whether they are the result of 'chance' or 'choice'; luck egalitarians could also interpret this idea as requiring that inequalities resulting from the influence of 'chance' on people's preferences and choices are potentially unfair. Dworkin's position effectively moves individual preferences (or at least those preferences that individuals endorse) out of the purview of egalitarian theory. This strikes me as an unattractive implication of his approach, and luck egalitarians need not be committed to this position.

This matters, not least because many of the circumstances that shape individuals' preferences are factors that we can influence: policy decisions can affect what kinds of preferences people come to have. To the extent that we can predict how particular policies or institutional arrangements will affect the formation of individual preferences, it is not unreasonable that we would want to take these effects into consideration. For example, if diversity in schools helps reduce class divisions and leads individuals to be less concerned about 'fitting in' in terms of their class background, this would give an egalitarian policy-maker a reason to encourage such diversity.

Relational and distributive equality revisited

As I mentioned at the beginning of the paper, underlying the argument presented here is the idea that distributive and relational theories of equality are not incompatible. Moreover, there is scope for a pluralist notion of equality in which both distributive and relational considerations play a role. While I haven't made that argument here, the higher education context and the particular case I focused on highlight the complementarity of the two perspectives. Both distributive and relational perspectives capture something important about equality that the other approach cannot capture (or cannot capture in the right way).

I suggested that we can frame the equality vs. adequacy debate in terms of the debate between distributive and relational approaches to equality. From a relational perspective, what matters is that the education system contributes to equality of status: this will have certain implications for what the education system must look like and how educational opportunities are to be distributed, but the distribution of these opportunities does not matter in and of itself. From a distributive perspective, on the other hand, adequacy in education is not enough because it leaves too much scope for unequal education to result in inequalities in other outcomes, such as income (e.g. Koski and Reich, 2006); for distributive egalitarians, these inequalities are unfair in and of themselves.

When it comes to the case of the student and his dislike for snobbish universities, distributive and relational egalitarians ask very different questions to identify the problem at hand. For distributive egalitarians, the concern is with the disadvantage that comes with the student's preferences. Relational egalitarians, because they reject the idea that distributions matter intrinsically, cannot (or at least cannot easily) capture the concern that there is something unfair about the discomfort and unease a non-traditional student might feel at a prestige university, unless they can make the case that this results from unjust treatment or is in other ways connected to relational inequality.

Relational egalitarians, however, would have a different take on what might be problematic about this case. Their concern would be to determine which connection, if any, the student's preference has with relational inequality. As I suggested earlier, they might ask whether the preference for associating with people who share one's background over people from different backgrounds is consistent with a society of equals. Both of these concerns — the welfare loss of non-traditional students in prestigious universities and the discomfort with interaction across social boundaries — are arguably important concerns a theory of equality should be able to capture.

The responses that distributive and relational egalitarians could propose to address the problem they identify also differ. From a distributive perspective, because it is the distributive inequality that matters, one way to respond would be to reduce the advantages that come with higher education (in terms of income, access to interesting jobs, etc.). If we were able to remove all these disadvantages, then a decision not to go to university would no longer matter. Similarly, if no advantages are attached to a degree from a posh university relative to a degree from a 'regular' university, then a distributive egalitarian might not see a problem with a higher education system that is divided in 'posh' and 'regular' universities. Similarly, for a distributive egalitarian, what matters is that the student not suffer disadvantages because of a preference he should not be held responsible for. From this perspective, there is no relevant difference between a dislike for posh universities and, say, a dislike for universities located in cities rather than the countryside, if there were similar costs attached to such a preference. This, it seems, misses out an important dimension of what makes the student's statement troubling.

To the extent that a relational perspective would consider the content of the preference expressed problematic, this assessment would remain even if the preference did *not* result in disadvantages for the students: from a relational perspective, it is the relational inequality that matters, irrespective of its impact on distributive inequalities. Christian Schemmel discusses the example of a piece of legislation that violates requirements of relational equality because it has racist intentions. The law, Schemmel argues, would remain problematic from a relational perspective even if, for reasons the legislator wasn't aware of, it actually leads to positive consequences for the targeted group:

> Even if it will regularly happen… that such laws lead to overall social inferiority of the members of the group… this need not be the case for them to be unjust. They would not cease to be unjust even if their targets experienced a *boost* in self-esteem, for example, due to their solidarity in indignation. (Schemmel, 2012: 140-141, emphasis in original)

These examples highlight that distributive and relational conceptions of equality propose very different ways of thinking about equality in the (higher) education context. At the same time, it is certainly not obvious that either of the two perspectives is superior to the other; both distributive and relational approaches have something important to add to the discussion of equality in education.

Conclusion

I started with a quote from a working-class student who has a dislike for posh universities, leading him to eventually decline an offer from a prestigious university. I focused on higher education choice and a very specific kind of preference. However, the issues raised here may also help us think about other scenarios where individuals' preferences that influence their choices — think, for example, of a female philosophy student who is considering graduate school but doesn't want to work in a field in which representation of women is so low. There may also be scenarios beyond the higher education context where these considerations matter; for example, where people choose to live may reflect considerations of 'fitting in', in terms of class, ethnicity, etc. This matters not least because neighbourhoods, of course, differ significantly in terms of the advantages they confer on their residents (e.g. available green spaces, public services, safety, etc.).

As I argued in this paper, both distributive and relational theories of equality can, on at least some interpretations, describe this scenario as problematic. One problem that both approaches run up against is that we often think that preferences, especially when they are explicitly endorsed, are too closely related to 'who we are' to be sources of unfair inequality. I suggested that there are good reasons for wanting to locate individuals' preferences, including those they endorse, within the purview of egalitarian theories — both as potential sources of unfair inequality and as reflecting (in)egalitarian attitudes.

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[1] While much of the literature focuses on the incomes attached to different jobs, it is also important that work can, to varying degrees, be meaningful, fulfilling, etc. Attas and De-Shalit (2004) discuss these issues within the context of distributive justice.
[2] For an account of working-class experiences in elite universities, see Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009).
[3] E.g. Shields (2016: 13).
[4] I discuss this in more detail in Voigt (forthcoming).
[5] It should be noted that, in his more recent work, Arneson has abandoned his equality of opportunity for welfare approach in favour of 'responsibility-catering prioritarianism'; see Arneson (2000b). However, while responsibility-catering prioritarianism requires that a luck egalitarian interpretation of equality be weighed against prioritarian

considerations, there is no indication that Arneson's understanding of responsibility itself has changed; see, for example, Arneson (2000a: 348).

[6] If that is how we interpret luck egalitarianism, does it collapse into equality of outcome? Arguably, if luck egalitarianism is willing to expand the scope of brute luck so far as to include individuals' preferences, then it is difficult to see that there would be *any* inequalities they would consider fair. While not everyone will find that position attractive, it would not be incoherent, and it remains distinct from an equality of outcome perspective in that the reasons it would give as to why no inequalities in outcomes are fair remain distinct.

[7] The objection can be mounted only against welfarists who adopt a subjective interpretation of welfare. Arneson, despite initially arguing in favour of 'distributive subjectivism' (e.g. Arneson, 1989, 1990) subsequently adopts an objective list interpretation of welfare (e.g. Arneson, 2000b). On the objective interpretation, he can respond to the expensive tastes objection by saying that 'satisfaction of these expensive and trivial preferences does little to advance the person's genuine well-being. Social resources devoted to satisfaction of preferences the individual mistakenly deems important are rightly viewed with a jaundiced eye as money down the drain' (Arneson, 2000b: 513).

[8] Strictly speaking, Cohen is not a welfarist. His preferred currency is 'advantage', which includes both subjective welfare and resources; see Cohen (1989).

[9] Keller (2002) also argues that the issue of expensive tastes is not settled by choosing any particular currency.

[10] Exceptions to this are Cohen (1999) and Quong (2006), who suggest that religious and cultural commitments – which we think can lead to unfair inequalities – are relevantly like expensive tastes.

[11] I would like to thank Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen for pressing me on this distinction.

[12] For example, we can see this thought in Buchanan's idea of 'social moral epistemology' (Buchanan, 2002; 2004).