

**Review of Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, Luck Egalitarianism. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.**

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Final version to appear in *Ethics*.

Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen has been an important contributor to many aspects of the debate around luck egalitarianism, which makes it particularly exciting to see him take stock of the current literature in this monograph. The book clarifies the central commitments of luck egalitarianism and brings admirable lucidity to a number of questions and concerns surrounding it, such as the ‘equality of what?’ question. Lippert-Rasmussen also addresses questions that have received relatively little attention in the literature despite their importance in spelling out the precise commitments of luck egalitarianism, for example with respect to the appropriate scope of luck egalitarianism. Along the way, Lippert-Rasmussen offers many novel ideas, such as his proposal for a new metric for luck egalitarianism.

In this review, I focus on Lippert-Rasmussen’s account of social relations egalitarianism (or relational egalitarianism) and its relationship to luck egalitarianism, which is the focus of chapter 7. Whereas luck egalitarians are primarily concerned with the fairness of distributions, relational egalitarians, such as Elizabeth Anderson and Samuel Scheffler, focus on social relations as the proper concern for egalitarians. Relational egalitarians have levelled some of the most powerful and compelling objections against luck egalitarianism.

The chapter makes several important points. First, Lippert-Rasmussen highlights a number of questions that relational egalitarians have not yet answered. Perhaps most crucially, what exactly it means to relate to one another as equals is often left underspecified in these theories. Similarly, social relations egalitarians have not said *which* relationships must meet requirements of relational equality.

Second, Lippert-Rasmussen explains why social relations egalitarianism is not necessarily incompatible with luck egalitarianism, contrary to what is commonly assumed in the literature. As Lippert-Rasmussen points out, it is not clear why luck egalitarians couldn’t accept that requirements of relational equality these are *also* elements of a theory of justice: ‘luck egalitarianism states a sufficient condition for a distribution being unjust. ...doing so leaves it entirely open for them to accept that there are other sufficient conditions and, more specifically, that for a society to be just people have to relate to one another as equals’ (183). Importantly, this means that it is not enough for relational egalitarians to make the case for the importance of social relations for theories of equality; that in itself is not a challenge for theories such as luck egalitarianism.

Finally, the chapter responds to two important objections social relations egalitarians have mounted against luck egalitarianism: the harshness and humiliation objections. Lippert-Rasmussen’s analysis highlights that in developing these objections, critics of luck egalitarianism sometimes focus on specific interpretations of luck egalitarianism that not all luck egalitarians are committed to, undermining the force of these objections.

Despite the strengths of the chapter, I’d like to suggest a slightly different understanding of relational equality and its relationship to luck egalitarianism. Lippert-Rasmussen’s discussion is based on what strikes me as an overly narrow focus on a number of contributions by

Elizabeth Anderson: this leaves off the table a number of important contributions to the literature on relational equality, made by Anderson in some of her other work as well as by other relational egalitarians. Adopting a broader focus on the relational literature suggests a somewhat different picture of relational equality and the objections raised by relational egalitarians.

Lippert-Rasmussen's exploration of social relations egalitarianism largely focuses on Anderson's 1999 article, 'What is the point of equality?'. In that paper, one of Anderson's central concerns is to argue that luck egalitarians would permit distributions in which individuals fall below a level of income necessary to operate as an equal citizen. For social relations egalitarianism, Lippert-Rasmussen argues, 'just distributions are distributions where everyone has enough, where "enough" means enough to participate in social and political life on an equal standing' (183). Relational egalitarians are not indifferent to distributive inequality, but, for them, 'such inequalities matter, from the point of view of justice, only instrumentally through their effects on the egalitarian character of social relations' (183).

This does not, I think, fully capture what social relations egalitarians have said about distributions. First, there is a wider range of distributive patterns that can undermine equal relations. In some of her more recent work, Anderson has emphasised that, on her account, we would want distributions not only to meet certain requirements of sufficiency but that it may also be necessary to impose restrictions at the top of the income distribution (so as to ensure that everyone is in the 'same boat' and to counteract the conversion of wealth into political power) and to ensure that individuals are concentrated around the middle of the income distribution (so as to avoid the creation of distinct low- and high-income groups) (Elizabeth Anderson, "How Should Egalitarians Cope with Market Risks?," *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 9, no. 1 [2008]: 239–270).

Second, distributions can also matter to social relations egalitarians for non-instrumental reasons. For example, Anderson suggests that, for relational egalitarians, distributions can be unjust because they are *caused* by unjust relations (Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010]; Anderson, "How Should Egalitarians Cope with Market Risks?"). Relational egalitarianism may also require that institutions express the right kind of attitudes towards individuals, which can also have implications for our assessment of the distributions that such institutions promote or permit (Christian Schemmel, "Distributive and Relational Equality," *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 11, no. 2 [2012]: 123–148).

While relational egalitarians are only beginning to work out the different ways in which relational equality could have implications for our assessment of distributions, the literature has gone beyond the focus on instrumental considerations that Lippert-Rasmussen discusses in his chapter and, even when only considering instrumental considerations, the variety of distributive patterns that relational egalitarians might object to is wider than we might think from his account. This is important not least because it broadens the scope for relational egalitarians to argue against particular distributions on egalitarian grounds (these issues are explored in more detail in Schemmel's "Distributive and Relational Equality").

The broader point to emphasise about relational egalitarians' approach to distributions (implicit in Lippert-Rasmussen's analysis but not discussed in much detail) is that relational egalitarians do not care about distributions *per se* and therefore are not, strictly speaking, seeking to describe 'just distributions' (183). For relational egalitarians, any assessment we

make of distributions must be based on a broader notion of relational equality: that is, we must ask, for example, whether a particular distributive pattern undermines relational equality, whether a particular inequality is the result of (relational) inequality, etc.

If that is how relational egalitarians think about distributions, this suggests a somewhat different way of criticising luck egalitarianism than Lippert-Rasmussen suggests: one way to understand the relational project is as a rejection of the idea that we should seek to assess distributive patterns directly, without relying on a broader notion of (relational) equality. From this perspective, what is wrong with luck egalitarianism is that the question it seeks to answer is misguided.

This objection is spelt out in Samuel Scheffler's work. He argues that 'the core of the value of equality does not... consist in the idea that there is something that must be distributed or allocated equally' (Samuel Scheffler, "What Is Egalitarianism?," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31, no. 1 [2003]: 5–39, 31) and that 'unless distributive egalitarianism is anchored in some version of that ideal [i.e. relational egalitarianism], or in some other comparably general understanding of equality as a moral value or normative ideal, it will be arbitrary, pointless, fetishistic: no more compelling than a preference for any other distributive pattern' (Scheffler, "What is Egalitarianism", 23).

Importantly, this objection applies to all distributive theories — that is, to theories that seek to determine directly whether or not distributions are fair. Framed in this way, the objection can apply to a broader range of theories than just luck egalitarianism. On the other hand, the challenge does *not* apply to theories that endorse luck egalitarian principles of distributions but anchor this endorsement in a notion of relational equality. For example, Schemmel suggests that relational egalitarians, because they are committed to respecting individuals' capacity to choose, may also want distributions to be sensitive to individual responsibility (Schemmel, "Distributive and Relational Equality", 142-143). To the extent that we can argue for luck egalitarian principles of distribution on relational grounds, the argument would not be susceptible to the objection just described.

Lippert-Rasmussen touches on these issues when he considers the idea that relational and luck egalitarians are answering different questions, with luck egalitarians focused on the question of what a just distribution is, whereas Anderson and other relational egalitarians are concerned with what a just state or society is. In response, he notes that at least some luck egalitarians address the question of what a just state or society is, and that for at least some luck egalitarians, the concern of equality is with social arrangements (200).

Once we understand the relational egalitarian's objection not as an objection to luck egalitarianism per se, but as an objection to distributive theories more generally, Lippert-Rasmussen's response looks like it misses the point. Lippert-Rasmussen also mentions Dworkin as an example of someone frequently (if incorrectly) placed in the luck egalitarian camp, who sees himself as answering the question 'what makes a just society' rather than focusing on the fairness of distributions. However, to the extent that Dworkin's starting point is the question what it means for institutions to treat individuals with equal concern and respect, his project is much more in line with the goals relational egalitarians pursue than with that of luck egalitarians who explicitly take themselves to ask what a fair or equal distribution is, and therefore not susceptible to this version of the relational objection.

With the connections between relational and luck egalitarianism reframed along these lines, it also becomes less clear whether Lippert-Rasmussen's argument that relational egalitarianism is subject to a version of the harshness objection really holds. To make this point, Lippert-Rasmussen asks us to imagine a poor society in which, because of the prevalence of infectious disease, everyone lives in harsh conditions, and that 'as a result of this everyone stands in relations of equality to one another' (190). A philanthropist then funds a free, one-off vaccination programme. However, a small minority of people refuse the vaccination. This, Lippert-Rasmussen argues, 'unavoidably' introduces hierarchical social relations. Anderson's account of democratic equality, he argues, 'implies that it would be unjust if the majority were to get themselves vaccinated and thereby escape their harsh conditions' (190); democratic equality therefore is susceptible to its own version of the harshness objection. Lippert-Rasmussen continues, 'To make this point more vivid, assume that this minority also forms a racial minority, and that its members' refusal of the vaccination will predictably result in stigma attaching to being a member of the relevant minority group... If it is an objection to luck egalitarianism that it recommends abandoning the imprudent, it seems no less objectionable that in cases of the sort just described democratic equality condemns the prudent majority for escaping their harsh conditions' (190-1).

However, several aspects of the thought experiment merit closer attention. First, it is worth emphasising that everyone living in equally harsh conditions does not *necessarily* translate into equal relations and, by the same token, that selective uptake of vaccination does not *necessarily* translate into unequal relations, as far as relational egalitarians are concerned. We can of course assume that these connections hold (and this might be all that Lippert-Rasmussen is stipulating in the example), but it's worth making explicit that these connections are not implied by relational egalitarianism. Relational egalitarians can, of course, ask how the distributive patterns in question affect relational equality but, at least to my mind, they are not committed to the view that an equal distribution *must* translate into relational equality nor to the view that an unequal distribution that involves very harsh outcomes *must* translate into unequal status.

Lippert-Rasmussen suggests that the point he seeks to make with the vaccination example 'becomes more vivid' (190) if we add to the example that the minority forms a racial group and that as a result of declining the vaccination, this group ends up stigmatised. If we specify the scenario in this way, then it does become clearly problematic from the perspective of relational equality. But, importantly, this goes beyond merely making the example more vivid in that, as I just suggested, relational inequality does not necessarily follow from the scenario as initially described.

In particular, there is a question about how relational egalitarians would think about a distribution in which everyone is below a threshold of sufficiency. When Anderson argues that below a certain threshold, people cannot operate as equal citizens, it sometimes seems that what she has in mind is an *absolute* threshold below which it is not possible to operate as a citizen (rather than a threshold that is defined relative to other people). If that is true, then in the pre-vaccination scenario it might be the case that equal relations cannot arise because individuals are simply too badly off to be relating to others in a meaningful way at all. If that is the case, then Lippert-Rasmussen's assumption that the move from pre- to post-vaccination scenarios involves a straightforward deterioration of relational equality needs further argument.

If we assume that the majority's decision to accept the vaccine does indeed lead to relational inequality and, let us also assume, that the majority are fully aware that these are the consequences of their accepting the vaccination, what would relational egalitarians say about this? This is, I think, an intriguing question for relational egalitarians, not least because they often suggest that what concerns them is unjust and wrongful treatment of others. Would they argue that citizens who accept the vaccination are treating unjustly those who reject the vaccination (because they know that this will result in relational inequality)? Framed in this way, the thought experiment poses an interesting challenge to relational egalitarianism. This challenge, however, is slightly different from how Lippert-Rasmussen describes it: it is not so much about the pro-vaccination citizens' permitting harsh outcomes but rather about their choices (that may otherwise be unproblematic) predictably leading to relational inequality. What would relational egalitarians want to say about such choices?

A final point I'd like to raise concerns the harshness objection, which is, I think, one of the most forceful challenges to luck egalitarianism. This objection has been raised by relational egalitarians such as Anderson and is therefore discussed by Lippert-Rasmussen in the chapter on relational egalitarianism. Discussing this objection here, however, could suggest a skewed understanding of the harshness objection. Importantly, the harshness objection can but need not be construed as objection particular to relational egalitarianism. From a relational perspective, as Anderson has argued, the worry is that luck egalitarianism permits outcomes that are so harsh that individuals' status as equal citizens is undermined. But we can also think of the harshness objection as an objection that is based on distributive rather than relational concerns. For example, we might simply be concerned that it could not be just to leave people to bear the costs of their choices when that leaves them destitute; this can be framed as a challenge posed by distributive egalitarians that object to a particular way of making egalitarianism sensitive to individual responsibility.

It is no coincidence that the critical comments in this review focused on Lippert-Rasmussen's understanding of the relationship between luck and relational egalitarianism rather than his account of luck egalitarianism itself. Lippert-Rasmussen's book makes a tremendous contribution to our understanding of luck egalitarianism and will no doubt become a central reference point for both its proponents and its critics.

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Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Adina Preda for helpful comments.