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On the Nature, Value, and Justification of Egalitarian Social Relations

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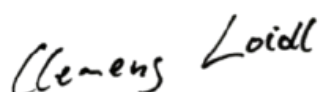


DECLARATION

I, undersigned Clemens Loidl, hereby declare that this dissertation is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 28th February 2025

Clemens Loidl

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Clemens Loidl". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Clemens" and the last name "Loidl" clearly distinguishable.

ABSTRACT

Despite a heightened awareness of social inequalities in politics and a steady influx of relational conceptions of equality within contemporary political philosophy, the idea of egalitarian social relationships has not received adequate attention. While considerable research efforts have gone into the examination of various kinds of social hierarchies, a plethora of fundamental questions about the social ideal of equality remain unaddressed. This dissertation seeks to remedy this situation by devising a comprehensive argument on the nature, value, and justification of egalitarian social relations.

By that, this thesis contributes to the positive project in relational egalitarian theory in three ways. I take a non-moralised approach in supplying a theoretical framework that explains in value-neutral terms the constitutive features of social relations in general and of egalitarian social relations in particular. I develop an expansive conception of what it means to be socially related based on the causal influence we exert on others' conduct and propose a contextual account that describes the distinctiveness of relating as social equals in terms of mutual treatment and regard that gives adequate and equal social consideration to others' social expressions of their agential commitments within shared contexts (Chapter 1).

Within this framework, I advance a novel account of the moral significance of egalitarian relationships. Given the paucity of positive conceptions of relational equality, I survey the theoretical landscape in the literature first and eventually argue for the personal value of egalitarian relationships on the basis of the contribution these make to the exercise of *social* agency (Chapter 2). That is, the kind of human agency which revolves around the pursuits of comprehensive goals against the backdrop of entrenched social relations, and which requires for its success a decent level of factual authority and social esteem. I defend the view that the exercise of agency *simpliciter* has prudential value, both instrumentally and in and of itself, drawing on a Razian-inspired

understanding of the self-directed, stable conception of ourselves that our agential commitments enable us to develop over time. Egalitarian social relations, I submit, are beneficial for realising this value, because these nurture our capacities for social agency (Chapter 3).

Based on this view, I identify two sets of egalitarian moral reasons for advancing such social relations. In close, personal relationships, I argue that we have agent-neutral reasons to equally promote individuals' capacities for social agency. In societal relations, I suggest that we have egalitarian reasons for respecting each other's social statuses and recognising our commitments equally. Both give rise to weighty *pro tanto* claims to egalitarian social relations (Chapter 4). Although not absolute, I show that these claims typically prevail and are not thwarted by competing considerations. I analyse considerations of merit, paternalism, and costs, and demonstrate that these do not generally outweigh or exclude acting on our egalitarian reasons (Chapter 5). Lastly, I consider and eventually dismiss liberal concerns from neutrality, showing that these egalitarian claims can be articulated in political liberal terms and permissibly enforced as demands of justice in a liberal state (Chapter 6).

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In times when the power of reason and the force of moral values seems waning, being able to immerse oneself in philosophy has been a blessing as well as a source of hope. From a forward-looking perspective, then, I dedicate this dissertation to Johannes, my godchild of eleven months, in the hope that, when he comes of age, equality will have become more, not less the norm in social relations.

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INTRODUCTION

If philosophy is supposed to be ‘its own time comprehended in thought,’ then there has never been a better time for philosophers to be writing about status and hierarchy. (Zuehl, 2024, 566)

Contemporary public discourse is ripe with a particular kind of social grievances. Among these are loudly voiced protests of feeling subordinated, charges of being treated with less concern, and outcries of being perceived with lesser rank or relegated to a lesser status¹. In other words, relational complaints about being treated unequally, of being unjustly placed under the thumb and subjected to the whims of others. A growing apprehension of interpersonal inequality has taken centre stage in politics. With it, a renewed sense of consciousness about status and hierarchical social relations has become a focal point of public debate in many political societies.

In a sense, these trends are puzzling. An awareness of social hierarchies is nothing new. On the contrary, hierarchical social stratification is, as some argue², an endemic and enduring social feature that makes up much of human and non-human animal life alike. In any modern time and context, we typically expect to find some to be socially ranked and considered above others. We are intimately familiar with these hierarchies. Equality in social relations is almost never a norm that we encounter. A simple explanation of why a heightened anxiety about social inequality currently draws so much ire and is capable of inspiring considerable political mobilisation is hard to come by. And yet, these social developments, of which the rise of identity politics of late, on either side of the political spectrum³, is indicative, seem to articulate a novel, political demand for instantiating

¹ See e.g. Runciman (1966) and Gurr (1970/2015) for pioneering studies on social inequalities and the grievances to which they give rise. On the idea of social subordination, see Moreau (2020). A current discussion of status-based grievances can be found in Ridgeway (2019) and Ridgeway & Markus (2022).

² For a classic statement, see e.g. Parsons (1940), for a more recent account on the evolution of social stratification see Henrich & Boyd (2008). Strauss et al. (2022) provide a comprehensive review of the study of non-human animal dominance hierarchies. Cf. also Kolodny (2023) on ‘pecking orders’ in Ch. 1.

³ We find these relational complaints in both camps, albeit with diametrically opposed positions. Whereas political movements on the left took an increased focus on the demands of societal minorities and historically marginalised groups, understood mostly, but not exclusively, in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity (see e.g. Frazer, 1995; Fraser & Honneth, 2003), the political right has, more recently, drawn on ethno-nationalist sentiment and the working class’s wrath about what is perceived as a push back to an inferior status in society (see e.g. Mudde, 2008; Freedman, 2020).

egalitarian social relations. Since these social grievances are, however, highly diverse and often based on subjective impressions that largely resist systematisation, they leave us wondering what the ideal is that we should aspire to on grounds of these demands. While this conundrum has led to greater public and academic attention, on closer inspection, the very notion of equality in social relations proved to be an elusive and hard-to-grasp idea.

Political philosophy has, with some delay, caught up with the debates about these social dynamics. Whereas Ronald Dworkin wrote not too long ago that the idea of equality had turned into an “endangered species of political ideals” (Dworkin, 2000, 1) in politics and political thought, egalitarian theorising has burgeoned over the past decades in the discipline. More recently, the field has seen a partial reorientation of its approaches to equality, paying increased attention to these relational grievances. Philosophers have sought to bring clarity to the puzzle, by examining the merits of an ideal of relating as social equals. Many agree that this demand captures something morally important, but theorists diverge greatly on how we should interpret such an ideal and what place we should assign to considerations about social equality in our normative political theories.

This dissertation is about this idea of egalitarian social relations. First and foremost, this is a study in the tradition of analytic political philosophy (see Wolff, 2013). To its standards of rigour, clarity, and logical analysis for normative argument, it aspires to⁴. It examines the philosophical credentials of this idea, by analysing what social relations of equality are, why these matter and have moral significance, and whether we as individuals are morally entitled to enjoy such relations. This project thus aims at a better understanding of the call for equality in social relations that we so frequently find in both public discourse and philosophical theory, by addressing these under-theorised questions in contemporary social egalitarian thought and subjecting them to analytical scrutiny.

⁴ In line with that, methodologically, this study approaches the topic at hand with the tools most commonly employed in the discipline, those of conceptual analysis and reflective equilibrium (see Blau, 2017).

For this, the thesis at hand seeks to answer three individual but interrelated questions:

1. What does it mean to be socially related and when are such relations specifically egalitarian in *nature*?
2. What is the *value* of egalitarian social relationships, what contribution do these relations make to the lives of individuals?
3. Do individuals have moral *claims* to enjoying egalitarian relations, claims which prevail in the face of other morally significant interests and values?

Practically, this is of interest because gaining a deeper comprehension of what drives so much of public discourse these days might contribute to overcoming the increasing polarisation that many societies globally face today. If grievances about status and hierarchies remain a persistent feature of politics, we urgently need more clarity about why, if at all, these matter and matter morally. That is, whether we have stringent action-guiding normative reasons to accommodate those concerns, combat certain social hierarchies, and alleviate the situation of those who are subjected to them. Since, should it turn out that these do not or should not have this weight, we might be better off dispensing with the idea of egalitarian relations instead. Perhaps these issues should not be accorded the significance that people, fuelled by identitarian sentiment and driven by populist political movements, attribute to them. This would give us reasons to reorient and focus our efforts on other pressing moral issues. That said though, this dissertation submits that at least some of these demands indeed express a morally relevant concern.

In terms of theoretical relevance, this inquiry sheds light on a number of vexing philosophical questions about the nature, value, and justification of social equality. Theorising about social equality has notoriously proven to lead to thorny, fundamental questions about which political philosophers by and large tend to disagree. Advancing a general and positive account of the morality of egalitarian social relations and their relevance in the lives of individuals is the main theoretical contribution that this thesis makes to contemporary political philosophy. Let me explain

in more detail where the specific theoretical motivation for this research endeavour stems from, by showing on the basis of three points how the project aims and goals are embedded within the current scholarly discourse in the discipline.

The positive project. Within political philosophy, this thesis is firmly situated in the contemporary egalitarian debate in the field of theories of justice. Since John Rawl's (1971) seminal *A Theory of Justice*, philosophical theorising about the value and concept of equality has constantly evolved and taken on ever-new shapes. It is fair to say that, at the present stage, egalitarians can be divided between those who develop and favour distributive conceptions (see e.g. Arneson, 1989; Cohen, 1989; Dworkin, 1981), and those who prefer social or relational⁵ conceptions of equality (Anderson, 1999; Fourie, 2012; Miller, 1997; Satz, 2010; Scheffler, 2003; Schemmel, 2012; Viehoff, 2014; Young, 1990).

Notably, these camps of egalitarian theorists start from different vantage points in conceptualising the value of equality. Whereas the former has long been established in the philosophical literature, the latter represents “a rather young but increasingly endorsed theory of justice” (Højlund, 2022, 10) that originates from criticism and misgivings about the distributive paradigm. That distributive egalitarians “take for granted that there is something which justice requires people to have equal amounts of” (Cohen, 1989, 906), relational egalitarians tend to see as fundamentally misguided (see Voigt, 2020). Our considerations about equality, so their thought, should instead be guided by how individuals relate to each other. Relational egalitarians are thus motivated by “seek[ing] a social order in which people stand in relations of equality. They seek to live together in a democratic community as opposed to a hierarchical one” (Anderson, 1999, 313). Equality appears primarily as an ideal of relating to one another as social equals and only secondarily as a concern with the just

⁵ As a matter of terminology, I shall use the terms ‘social’ and ‘relational’ equality or egalitarianism interchangeable throughout this thesis. In my interpretation, the term social equality had historically been in use much earlier, whereas relational equality really only emerged as a description of social egalitarian accounts of *justice* more recently. At points where this distinction has salience, I will note it in the chapters.

distribution of positions and material advantages – a controversial thesis that has consequently been debated fiercely over the past two to three decades⁶. It is to this intra-egalitarian debate⁷, and specifically to the prospects of defending social conceptions of equality for a theory of justice⁸, that this dissertation seeks to contribute to.

Now, an obvious first question that we will have about these relational theories of equality is the following: What does it mean that, and when do, individuals relate to one another as *social* equals? (cf. Gosepath 2021). What seems like a trivial request, one that we expect its theorists to easily provide an answer to, turns out, however, to be astoundingly difficult to find precisely argued for in the relational egalitarian literature. To the extent that some relational egalitarians have explicitly engaged with it, strikingly different, even competing, answers were given.

Much of the seminal theorising about relational equality (see especially Young, 1990; Anderson, 1999), namely, has been predominantly *negative*, i.e. focussing on the evaluation of various kinds of social inequality, their objectionable features and disvalue. Yet, claiming that inequalitarian social relations are bad or something to be avoided, is not the same as giving reasons for why egalitarian social relations are good or to be promoted. Such an approach captures the ideal of relational equality only derivatively, by specifying what egalitarian relations exclude, rather than as a positive view, by articulating why relating as social equals has value or is required.

⁶ For a current overview of the debate see Heilinger (2024), for a slightly dated discussion of this rapidly growing literature, see Elford (2017) and Moles & Parr (2019).

⁷ One caveat upfront: this is not a thesis about this relationship between distributive and relational egalitarianism, nor is it one about the relative importance of distributions or the comparative place of these in a relational theory of equality. The arguments in this thesis remain, as best as possible, neutral about substantive views towards these questions (although I will occasionally touch on some implications for such views, cf. Chapters 1 and 4).

⁸ In addition to that, relational egalitarianism has also been defended as a democratic theory, providing an argument for the value of democracy by construing it as a constitutive element of relating as equals (see Anderson, 1999; Kolodny, 2014a/ 2014b; Motchoulski, 2021; Viehoff, 2014).

This, however, was non-accidental in the view of some of the early leading authors in this field. Anderson (2010), for example, reflects in a later piece on this, arguing that relational egalitarianism advances principles and ideals not for a perfect world from the point of justice,

“but ones that we need to cope with the injustice in our current world, and to move us to something better. [...] We recognize the existence of a problem before we have any idea of what would be best or most just. Nor do we need to know what is ideal in order to improve.” (Anderson, 2010, 3)

On this account, a positive view of the ideal of relational equality is not necessary. Indeed, a negative approach is not only fully sufficient but also superior for fulfilling the main task of relational egalitarianism: identifying objectionable hierarchies of esteem, authority, and social standing (cf. Anderson, 2018), and the relational problems of oppression, domination, social exclusion, and stigmatization (cf. Young, 1990). Other authors, such as Wolff (2015), concur with the negative approach, suggesting that it is “unlikely that any detailed positive account will command wide assent among those who favour social equality” (Wolff, 2015, 221).

This emphasis on a negative thesis and the proposal for seeing relational egalitarianism essentially as an exercise in non-ideal theory (cf. Valentini, 2012; Stemplowska & Swift, 2012), has over time been met with general dissatisfaction among philosophers. Both on parts of those who were intrigued by this approach to the value of equality but wanted to know more about its general implications and those who were more critical of the plausibility of the project in the first place.

Tomlin’s (2014) articulates this commonly held impression, that, regrettably,

“[e]xplaining the value or importance of egalitarian social relationships, or what kind of value or importance they are thought to hold, has not played a central role in the articulation of relational theories of equality.” (Tomlin, 2014, 5)

For relational egalitarianism to be a proper theory of justice, however, these normative questions arguably need to be engaged with. To be a proper guide for our actions, we expect a theory of justice to be informative about a wide range of issues. A full theory of justice thus requires an

adequately specified ideal, otherwise it collapses. Therefore, a relational egalitarianism that does not defend a positive thesis appeared to many *incomplete*.

Not least because of these reasons, relational egalitarians have recently turned more towards developing the positive dimensions in their theories further (e.g., Bengtson, 2023a; Bidadanure, 2016; Fourie et al., 2015; Kolodny, 2023; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018; Nath, 2020; Scheffler, 2015; Schemmel, 2021; Voigt, 2018). As much of this reoriented theory-building is still in its inception, the efforts in this thesis should be seen as adding to this nascent state of theorising about the positive project of relational egalitarianism.

A general theory. Completing the relational egalitarian project requires more than a mere reorientation though. The current relational egalitarian literature is comprised of various disparate ideas, proposals, and claims that have not been systematically analysed in relation to one another⁹. On the contrary, an overarching framework for categorising accounts and contributions to the literature is, at present, mostly lacking (cf. Joyce, 2020).

A brief survey of extant accounts reveals the fragmented state of relational egalitarian thought. We can observe that relational theorists (even within one and the same person) have expressed very different, even opposing, views over time of what it is that makes social relationships valuably egalitarian. Whether such relations require equality of power (Anderson, 2017), equal control over people's lives (Scanlon, 2002), some type of equal authority (Kolodny, 2014a), equal influence over joint decision-making (Viehoff, 2014), a disposition to give equal weight to others' interests (Scheffler, 2015), equal civic status (Cass, 2025), equality of esteem (Fourie, 2015), or equal standing in a variety of these dimensions (Anderson, 2018). Additionally, philosophers disagree about which inequalities are objectionable, and which are consistent with their ideal. It is, for instance, disputed whether only strict equality in any of those aspects is acceptable or whether some social hierarchies

⁹ For a concise summary of this theoretical landscape, see e.g. Nath (2020) and Voigt (2020).

are tolerable. Their proposals also differ regarding the relative weight that is assigned to this ideal when compared with other values, and consequently, in whether we should be monist or pluralist social egalitarians (see Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018). And these authors vary in their assessment of the entities between whom those social relations of equality are assumed to hold, whether they are seen primarily as a matter of interpersonal conduct (Schuppert, 2013) or institutional treatment (Schemmel, 2021), to hold in our current, domestic society only, or even above (Bidadanure, 2021) and beyond (Nath, 2011).

While of late, some have engaged in the comparative task of evaluating the respective shortcomings and merits of individual accounts of relational equality (see e.g. Viehoff, 2019), these issues in the project of relational egalitarianism trace back to a deeper problem. Beyond any substantive disputes, there is a lack of clarity as to how we should even theorise about the core commitments in social egalitarian thought. That is, about the conceptual and normative elements that provide the foundation for any conception of social equality.

Consider for that purpose the various interpretations that can be given to the central concept of egalitarian relationships. There are various ways in which one can approach this task. Should we, for example, theorise about egalitarian social relations by starting with personal relationships, taking good friendships or romantic relationships (cf. Scheffler, 2015), as paradigm instances of those? Or should we begin with the social relations between citizens in political societies (cf. Anderson, 1999), to gain an understanding of what those core egalitarian credentials are? Are any egalitarian instances of those relationships even relevantly similar? Do the egalitarian norms and prescriptions that are operative in one, travel to another type of social relations (see Chan, 2021)? And can relationships be egalitarian but still in some sense deficient or objectionable? Such are crucial questions for any relational theory of equality, ones that require an appropriate analytical framework and which arguably come prior to our evaluation of egalitarian relations in particular circumstances or settings.

All too often, however, theorising about relational equality already begins on a substantive level, relies on unexamined intuitions and appeals to canonical accounts, or starts from assumptions made solely based on vague commonsensical understandings (see Joyce, 2020). With some notable exceptions (e.g. Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018; van Wietmarschen, 2022), insufficient attention has been paid to an examination of the elementary components of social egalitarian theory. Yet, just as we may demand a positive view of the ideal of relational equality, we have reason to request a general theory of egalitarian social relations as well. A theory that systematically explains the core features at the heart of any account of relational equality.

Against the backdrop of this theoretical landscape, this thesis thus takes a different approach. It takes a step back from well-established views and engages with some of the basic and hitherto mostly neglected questions. Rather than analysing what social hierarchies are, as many theorists currently do (see e.g. Kolodny, 2023; Wolff, 2019), it devises a comprehensive argument that illuminates the theoretical foundations of the idea of egalitarian social relations instead. This should, to some degree, help us bring order to the various claims and proposals in the literature. If successful, it allows for better comparisons of particular views and more apt evaluations of their merits. This is another main aspiration through which this thesis attempts to contribute to contemporary social egalitarian thought.

Human agency and social forms. A noteworthy way by which this thesis seeks to achieve these aims is by providing a deeper grounding to our thinking about the significance of egalitarian relationships. The principal idea to which I am appealing throughout this thesis, and which will shine through at several steps in the arguments provided, is the one of human agency. The relevance of this idea will unfold gradually and its connection to social equality will be developed incrementally over the course of the chapters, but, given its relevance to the overall aims of the thesis, I shall briefly introduce the motivation for the proposal that I offer.

There is a general puzzlement as to why egalitarian social relations have much significance in the first place. They are a non-tangible feature of human relations and, unlike many other goods or bads in human lives, are for that reason hard to grasp precisely. They resemble an ideal which historically was largely absent and has arguably rarely been realised to its fullest degree in any society. What specific benefits or advantages could we ascribe to such elusive phenomena to provide to individuals? My overall suggestion in this thesis is that egalitarian social relations are, in a particular sense, important and beneficial to us as agents, as acting persons. Moreso, they are a fitting response to the fact of our status as agents, of us being creatures capable of intentionally carrying out actions with others and against the background of a shared social world.

Exercising our agential capacities, being able to deliberate, choose, and guide our actions (see Buehler, 2022) towards pursuing relationships and projects of our own, is to have a self-directed life. An important aspect of a flourishing life – it means ‘living one’s life from the inside, according to one’s own inclinations and values’ as Mill (1869), for example, describes it. Our self-directed exercises of human agency are, however, in an uneasy tension with the social world that we are thrown into. In all sorts of ways are the venues for our exercises of agency shaped, created, or enabled by the features of existing social settings. On the one hand, this supports our agential aspirations. Think of commitments such as pursuing marriage or a career in academic philosophy. We can pursue these things because of social institutions that are operative in our societies, and which were established before us. These allow us to take on roles and provide us with social practices or customs to pursue our ends. As Raz (1986) writes, all our comprehensive goals, those ends that are integral to our chosen lives, must be based on existing *social forms* (cf. Raz, 1986, 308). Pursuing our substantive goals well just requires some “social forms of recognition, organisation, status, and convention” (Crisp, 1997, 509).

Yet, on the other hand, this means that our agency is often not as self-directed as we would have it. We typically cannot but fall back on just the social practices and customs made available by our

societies to pursue any commitments. Some ends and means are outside the reach of socially recognised forms. Even more, social relations can directly constrain the scope of our agency, either generally or relative to others. We are hindered in the exercise of our agential capacities when our societies are deficient, when the only social forms available are objectionable or not accessible to us. Marriage that is not open to any but a heterosexual couple, is an example. Impeding some individuals' agency this way, by rendering it socially impossible (or highly costly) to pursue marriage for them, is one reason why this model of marriage is morally problematic. Truly self-directed agency is difficult to realise under restrictive social relations that are typically both pervasive and persistent.

Entrenched social relations and the prospects of valuable exercises of agency are thus, on this suggested view, tightly intertwined. Social relations both enable and restrain what we can adopt as agential commitments. While this is not a novel point *per se*, it offers a distinct vantage point for approaching the ideal of relating as social equals. Considering the significance of egalitarian social relations on the grounds of their effects on human agency, is the background against which this thesis investigates the nature, value, and justification of egalitarian relationships. This thesis is thus in parts as much a reflection on human agency under social relations as it is a theory of egalitarian social relationships. The upshot of this endeavour is that it provides us with a distinct and fresh perspective on the deeper grounds of our moral concerns with social equality and our reservations about inegalitarian or hierarchical social relations.

The six chapters of this thesis correspond to an examination of the three research questions with these points in mind. To be precise, Chapter 1 analyses the nature of social relatedness in general and of egalitarian social relations in particular. Utilising a nuanced understanding of their nature, Chapters 2 and 3 defend a novel view of the moral and prudential value of these social relations. The remaining Chapters 4, 5, and 6 each engage with different questions about the justification of moral claims that are based on the evaluative view established prior. For a better overview and

given the length of the thesis at hand, let me give a short description of each chapter and briefly summarise the arguments that await the reader in these.

Chapter 1 considers the basic questions in any social egalitarian theory, those about what social relations conceptually are, under which conditions these are obtained, and when those are specifically of an egalitarian kind. Although mostly underexplored or neglected in the relational egalitarian literature, I explain that *how* we theorise about these fundamental questions has important consequences for the insights that our preferred substantive theory of social equality eventually can provide. Against the prevalent current of moralised understandings, I argue that we should opt for a non-moralised and context-sensitive approach for this task instead. Such an approach captures the features of social relations in value-neutral terms and allows for a generally informative conception. With that in mind, I advance an expansive, one-way theory of social relatedness based on a restricted causal influence view. On this account, social relations have a wide scope and can extend temporally, towards future generations, and spatially, towards non-citizens. On grounds of this general view, I discuss several different non-moralised understandings of the nature of egalitarian social relations, which bring forth some *desiderata* for a plausible conception: the specifically egalitarian properties of such relations need to be described distinctly, in a way that does not reduce these to relations between moral equals but demonstrates their genuine social dimension instead. The conception that I defend on these criteria, describes the *equalisandum* in terms of *equal* and *adequate social consideration* with which individuals as committed *agents* are to be mutually *treated* and *regarded*. A less technical, more practical rendering of which is, to say, that individuals socially relate to one another as equals if, and only if, they mutually treat and regard each other's social roles not only as equally but also as adequately socially important. This gives us an account that recognises social equality primarily as a matter of context-dependent conduct between persons considered as social agents, as a specific quality of the relations between individuals' social selves in certain social contexts, so to speak.

Chapter 2 is the first of two chapters that deal with questions of value in the context of egalitarian social relations. Preparing the groundwork for a comprehensive account in the subsequent chapter, the aim here is to approach the question of why, if at all, such social relations are desirable and gain an understanding of where such value plausibly could reside. While the family of relational egalitarian theories has largely eschewed the task of giving an explicit account of their positive value (see above), I argue that we can nevertheless find some helpful clues in the literature that are instructive for establishing such a positive view. That is, we can use the distinctions that were established in these predominantly negative-oriented theories to uncover the implicit positive views held by their authors. Employing these in an exegetical analysis of two influential accounts, those by Elizabeth Anderson (1999) and Samuel Scheffler (2005), I show that both authors hold promising, yet underspecified, views that recognise a distinct personal value in egalitarian social relations. Both authors similarly capture the harm- and wrong-making features of inequalitarian social relations, seeing them as bad because detrimental to human flourishing and wrong because in some sense freedom-limiting. Reflecting on this, I suggest, by way of internal critique, that a more precise way to account for these wrong- and harm-making features of inequalitarian relations, is to see them as impediments to human agency under entrenched social structures. Conversely, this allows us to grasp the value of egalitarian social relations as the positive contribution these make to people's capacities for exercising agency. Not any exercises of agency, however, I argue we should take as relevant here, but those that are inherently of a social nature. Thus, I lastly propose a distinction between individual and social agency, the latter of which plays the dominant role in the arguments in this thesis. On this account, for successful and valuable exercises of this kind of agency, a decent level of both factual authority and social esteem is required. In the contribution to these exercises of human agency is, I submit, the *locus* of where the value of egalitarian social relations resides.

Chapter 3 takes this emerging evaluative view to the next stage by giving a moral argument for the exact value that the exercise of agency and, by extension, egalitarian social relations have. I defend the view that the exercise of agency *simpliciter* has prudential value. The lives of people are going better – their well-being is increased – when they are able to intentionally carry out their actions into the world. Often such agency has instrumental value, i.e. because it allows us to acquire and hone skills, but crucially, its exercise has also in and of itself value, because, I suggest, in committing to projects and relationships, it allows for adopting a self-directed, coherent conception of ourselves over time. This is, what Raz (1986) calls a process of normative self-creation that gives unity to us as practical agents. Drawing on recent (Nguyen, 2020) and classic (Suits, 1978) works in the philosophy of games, I explain the non-instrumental value in exercising agency through the experience that inhabiting various agential (pre-)configurations in different contexts provides. This relates to the central idea of social agency: in being able to adopt and pursue social roles, for example, which come with certain role-dependent ends and well-defined means to meet them, we gain such value from these agential activities that are performed in various social relations. Yet, to realise this value, individuals need to find themselves in conditions conducive to the effective exercise of social agency. This is where a concern with egalitarian social relations comes into play. These relations are, so I argue, constitutive of effective social exercises of agency. Being treated (and sometimes) regarded with adequate and equal social consideration *nurtures* our capacities for valuable exercises of social agency. This completes the evaluative view, giving us, I believe, an attractive account of how egalitarian social relations derive their specific value.

The remaining chapters are each dedicated to the overall justification of substantive egalitarian, moral claims based on this theory, showing the considerations in their favour and defending them against objections. **Chapter 4** begins this threefold task by proposing a reasons-based approach for grounding *pro tanto* claims to egalitarian relations based on our prudential interests in social agency. Such an approach, I argue, is best suited to overcome the central challenge in establishing

these claims, viz. to show that these are based on substantively egalitarian considerations that are appropriate in scope. I identify two sets of normative reasons that support such claims in the different contexts of close, personal relationships and wide, societal relations. In contexts with our near and dear, we have agent-neutral¹⁰ moral reasons to bring about egalitarian social relationships, by promoting everyone's capacities for social agency equally. We ought to act in ways that ensure individuals have access and opportunities to effective social agency, that is, that they are in (more) egalitarian relationships. This contrasts with societal relations, whose mediated nature gives us reasons, I claim, for respecting each person's assigned or ascribed social status equally. These are agent-relative reasons which derive from a norm of recognition respect, and which tell us to treat status-holders with adequate and equal social consideration. We ought to act in ways that treat them and their commitments respectfully, as adequately and equally authoritative and esteem-worthy in their pursuits. We thus have, I claim, general and weighty, yet only *pro tanto* valid, egalitarian claims to such social relations. I suggest understanding these as Scanlonian abstract rights claims, which derive their overall standing from considerations about their reasonableness and practical feasibility. As such, these are susceptible to opposing considerations but give us a strong presumption in favour of claims to relate to one another as social equals in various social contexts.

Chapter 5 continues the justificatory argument by taking seriously some prominent and commonly cited, potentially decisive considerations for contesting the all-things-considered validity of our egalitarian claims. Considerations that recommend tolerating social hierarchies or otherwise permit inegalitarian social relations by either outweighing or excluding acting on these egalitarian reasons. The considerations that I discuss in this chapter come from the ideas of merit, paternalism, and (primarily, efficiency-based) costs. I show that these considerations are not only of a differential nature but also have different standing in social contexts. Considerations of merit can, but only in

¹⁰ To be precise, agent-neutral reasons with special agent-relative force, nevertheless.

limited form, trump our egalitarian claims in close, personal relationships but have considerably less traction in contexts of wide, societal relations. Some merited differences in social standing in the former type of social relations can be permissible if, and only if, they are justified on special (functional) grounds and when certain context- and content-limitations are in place. Considerations of paternalism weigh against our egalitarian claims when enforcing these would require us to act strongly paternalistically. Yet, as I show, weak paternalism is, to some degree, justifiable in both types of social relations. As such, these considerations typically do not outweigh acting on our egalitarian reasons. Cost-based considerations, such as those that stem from the value of efficiency, likewise only rarely outweigh egalitarian claims. This is to say, permitting inegalitarian social relations on grounds of opportunity or transaction costs is usually insufficiently weighty. The argument in this chapter shows that our claims to egalitarian social relations are not, generally at least, thwarted by these considerations. That said, I recognise that the discussions of both paternalism and costs bring forth independent concerns about when these claims are enforced by the state, that cannot outright be rejected.

Chapter 6 lastly takes the cues from the previous chapter's analyses and subjects these remaining, as I argue, specifically *liberal* concerns to scrutiny. I show that the considerations at the heart of these concerns do not directly target the ideal of social equality but instead are about the enforcement of our egalitarian claims as demands of justice in a liberal state. Specifically, they call into question whether a state that ought to be neutral about its citizens' conceptions of the good can legitimately attempt to meet these potentially controversial claims and, in the process of doing so, without overburdening individuals. I argue that this is best framed as a discussion of state perfectionism as well as the so-called site of justice debate within liberal theory. Corresponding to these liberal requirements, I show that our claims to egalitarian social relations are compatible with non-comprehensive, anti-perfectionist liberal aspirations. That is, they can be understood in terms of the project of political liberalism in contemporary political philosophy. Moreover, I show that

this understanding can also make room for non-institutionalist sites of justice, among which is individual behaviour. Charging individuals with substantive duties is, so I argue, not unreasonably overdemanding nor does enforcing these claims violate a principle of liberal legitimacy. With that, I conclude that our egalitarian claims are consistent with the conditions of liberal justice and the limits of legitimate state action.

The **Conclusion** brings this thesis to a close, by reflecting on the overall insights that this theory of social equality provides to the positive project of relational egalitarianism, where the individual arguments leave us, and what remains yet to be examined in future work.

CHAPTER 1.

THE NATURE OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

What do we mean when we say that we are socially related or that we relate to another person as a social equal or unequal? In some sense, this question seems to be rather trivial. We do straightforwardly seem to know when we share a social relationship. The second part of the question, while less obvious, we may also find intuitively rather easy to answer. We are, after all, intimately familiar and well acquainted with social hierarchies and the human ‘pecking orders’ (cf. Kolodny, 2023) in our social lives. However, when we reflect more thoroughly on what exactly it is that makes some social relation an instance of an egalitarian ideal and others deficient from that point, our judgements are, I suspect, often less certain. It is hard to pinpoint the exact features that define inequalitarian social relations when these come in less extreme kinds than the prime examples that we find in the often-cited systems of caste and bondage. Similarly, we can reasonably expect to be met with some disagreement when we propose to someone what, in our view, the precise circumstances are, under which we relate to each other as social equals. That is, when social relations are desirably egalitarian, even when we both agree that this would be a good thing. So, despite our familiarity with these terms and notions in our everyday lives, their abstract foundations turn out to be vague or ambiguous at best.

This conundrum is, as I have argued in the Introduction, also reflected in the philosophical literature. Despite the consolidation of relational egalitarianism and a growing body of literature of similar spirited developments in neighbouring fields notwithstanding – think of the burgeoning social human rights discourse or the growing body of theories on relational autonomy (see e.g. Couto, 2022; Stoljar & Voigt, 2021) – there seems to be a widespread lack of agreement on the very fundamental elements that make up social relations. Not rarely can disagreements between elaborate theories be traced back to diverging intuitions about their constitutive features. As

ubiquitous as the ‘social turn’ in humanities and social sciences is (see Plou et al., 2022), several theoretical and conceptual aspects of social relatedness remain underexplored. Yet, as the case of relational egalitarianism, specifically, rests on the prospect of giving plausible answers to the question of why egalitarian social relations matter in their own right, this is regrettable. If egalitarian social relations are taken to be of special value, then a precise and adequate account of what constitutes those social relations of equality must be given first.

This shows, I believe, why examining these foundational questions has merit. In making progress on these, we are better suited to gain an understanding of their distinct role in manifold aspects of human lives. The aim of this chapter is therefore to devise a theory of the nature of social relations in general and of egalitarian social relations in particular. Providing answers to these questions helps identify the concrete reasons why certain substantive accounts of relational equality diverge and enables us to lay out a general groundwork for thinking about egalitarian social relations in other settings and regarding other normative questions, too. For this thesis specifically, uncovering the foundations of (egalitarian) social relations supplies the background for engaging with the question of their value later on. As I shall show, how we describe what (egalitarian) social relations are, has certain relevant implications for where we think their value resides.

For this purpose, this chapter is structured as follows: in section 1.1., I first engage with the notion of social relatedness and consider several proposals for the conditions under which social relations between individuals are obtained. I discuss both moralised and non-moralised, one-way and two-way accounts of social relatedness and defend a particular non-moralised, one-way causal impact view. I continue by exploring possible egalitarian accounts of social relations and eventually establish in section 1.2. that social relations are egalitarian if, and only if, both parties in a social relationship treat and regard each other’s social expressions of agency with adequate and equal consideration. Together with the prior account of social relatedness, this yields a complex and distinct view, the implications and scope of which, I lastly discuss in section 1.3.

One last note, before I begin with the examination of the two main questions of this chapter: the conceptions of social relatedness and of egalitarian social relations that I devise and develop here are in some respect detached from our everyday use of these terms. Part of this is owed to the specific approach I take (see below), part to the fact that many natural languages do not explicitly distinguish between the variety of human relations, social and non-social. Hence the need to introduce novel terms or redefine some of the existing ones. Another reason for this is driven by theoretical consistency and clarity. We want, I suggest, rather technical conceptions of these notions, even when they diverge from our common usages of the terms because they allow us to engage in more precise ways with the relevant theoretical and normative aspects of social (in-)equality. While this may render the assessment of the argument for the reader more difficult at first glance, I hope that the detailed discussions and examples given in this, and the following chapters will ameliorate that.

1.1 What is it to be socially related?

Human beings are socially related to one another in manifold ways, be it in intimate relationships, amicable and/or romantic, voluntary associations or through loosely connected and institutionally mediated ways. Those relations differ both qualitatively, in their purpose and features, and quantitatively, in the number of people involved or affected. With some participants, people interact on a daily basis, with others, individuals are related without ever having met them personally. It is reasonable to assume such relations to hold only between natural, individual persons (cf. Kolodny, 2023, 13). Still, even with this qualification, social relations are best thought of as situated on a scale, ranging from close, personal relationships to societal relations (and possibly, beyond that). Relational egalitarian theorists have traditionally focussed on the co-citizenship relation as the paradigm social relation relevant to contemporary societies but, naturally, these represent only one instance in which individuals are meaningfully socially related. As many more social relations of different scopes and quality exist, one might thus rightfully demand those

theorists to justify why some relations specifically matter and explain which properties they take to be fundamentally important. This is a crucial theoretical task that has, as Bengtson & Lippert-Rasmussen (in press) stress, mostly been eschewed by relational egalitarians. Yet, without a plausible view of who is socially related in the first place, we lack the proper understanding of the scope and, thus, of who falls under the purview of an ideal of relational equality (cf. Nath, 2015).

With this in mind, I aim to provide a plausible account of what it takes for individuals to be socially related. One that is sensitive to these varieties in content and context, and one which explains the relevant features of social relations in a consistent and coherent manner. Surveying extant accounts of social relatedness in the literature first, I shall argue that the so-far established theories are insufficient to account for some of our crucial intuitions and considered judgments about social relations. I will then propose an account that is designed to overcome these deficiencies and which, I believe, properly accounts for the scope of social relatedness.

Approaching this task of identifying the conditions under which individuals are socially related, let me briefly discuss the conceptual prerequisites first. Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (2018) has helpfully laid out the logical space for conceptualising human relations in great detail. On his account, relating to one another is always short for relating to one another in a particular dimension. Or “to say that: X and Y relate as equals, is always shorthand for: X and Y relate as equals in terms of Z” (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, 69). As such, Lippert-Rasmussen advances a thoroughly pluralist position on egalitarian relations. This follows because he also recognises different standings in which people can be related to one another. These dimensions include moral, epistemic, social, aesthetic, and empirical standings. For the purpose of this chapter, the dimension of social

standing¹¹ is of primary interest, albeit its relation to others, especially moral standing, is relevant, too.

The reason why I adopt Lippert-Rasmussen's decidedly pluralist framework is because it, I believe, correctly recognises the context-dependency of relations between people. A social context can be defined either as the one particularly relevant relationship or the sum of individual relationships that make up the comprehensive social relations between participants in a given situation. To illustrate, when we are interested in examining the conditions of amicable relations, then we might look at the individual relationship of friends to see what needs to be fulfilled so that a particular relationship takes the form of a so-and-so structured friendship. Should we, on the other hand, be interested in examining what the conditions of social status within society are, we best have a look at the legal relationships between co-citizens, the informal relationships based on social norms, and/or the political relationships between residents and representatives. In short, we are interested in the many individual relationships that form the dense web of a social relation that is the social context. So, even within one dimension of standing, different specific contexts require different conditions to be met so that individuals are related in the relevant sense. In sum, we can hold that within the dimension of social standing, what it means to be socially related is dependent on the particular features of relationships, or the sum thereof – that is, the features of the relevant social context.

Coming back to Lippert-Rasmussen's proposal, to be related socially is on my understanding then formally best described as 'X relates to Y socially [in terms of social standing] in social context C, if, and only if, ...'. With these prerequisites settled, we can now turn to the more substantive project of determining how to describe what follows in the second part of this stipulative definition.

¹¹ As a matter of terminology, I use 'social standing' to denote broadly that an individual counts socially, and 'social status' in the specific, comparative sense. For a similar usage concerning moral standing and status, see e.g. Buchanan (2009).

Here, Bengtson (2025) and Bengtson & Lippert-Rasmussen (in press) provide a useful, quadripartite taxonomy of the possible views one can consistently hold towards this question. In short, they distinguish, on the one hand, between moralised and non-moralised views, and on the other hand, between one-way and two-way views.

Beginning with the first pair, moralised views are those that explain the fact of social relatedness by reference to the moral concerns we seek to explain. Relational egalitarians traditionally objected to issues such as sexism, domination, and paternalism. On a moralised view, some person X is socially related to another person Y, then, if, and only if, X is able to treat or regard Y in sexist ways, dominate Y, or capable of paternalizing Y, or *vice versa*. Here, social relatedness is a direct result of certain morally salient features of individual relations between persons. Non-moralised views are in contrast, as Bengtson & Lippert-Rasmussen argue, lexical views that explain social relatedness by virtue of certain features that do not reference moral (dis-)value. As we have also noted above, one feature that immediately strikes one as worth considering is direct, actual interaction. On such a non-moralised view, we can then say that some person X is socially related to another person Y if, and only if, X has direct, actual interactions with another person Y, or *vice versa*. While intuitive, such a view is also trivial – it is unlikely that direct, actual interactions are the single one feature that picks out the necessary and sufficient conditions for social relatedness. Non-moralised views naturally gain traction when they, lexically, list (more abstract) necessary conditions that jointly explain when, and when only, people are socially related, albeit with this coming at the expense of theoretical parsimony.

Such non-moralised views are prominent in the literature and are often, implicitly, held by relational egalitarians. Lippert-Rasmussen's own (2018) substantive view says that individuals are socially related if they are able to communicate (in some relevant ways) with one another. Arguably, Kolodny's (2014b/2023) view is also a non-moralised one when he argues that people are socially related if they have ongoing or temporarily extended interactions with one another. And so is

apparently Schemmel's (2021) view, too, as he argues that only existing, non-trivial social interactions ground social relatedness (see Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018; Kolodny, 2023; Schemmel, 2021; cf. Bengtson & Lippert-Rasmussen, in press).

One-way and two-way views cut across this distinction by centring on whether one or both¹² parties in the relation need to satisfy the relevant criteria. On a one-way view, it is necessary and sufficient for social relatedness if only one party is e.g. able to communicate with the other. On two-way views, only if both parties are able to communicate with the other, then they are socially related. In essence, this leaves us with four logically possible ways of construing social relatedness: the non-moralised one-way view, the non-moralised two-way view, the moralised one-way view, and the moralised two-way view (cf. *ibid.*).

Each of these four views is, lastly, open to (non-)scalar or threshold interpretations. Whether or not an individual instance of communication or an individual instance of a racist attitude is, for example, sufficient to ground social relatedness, depends on whether we adopt a scalar or threshold conception. On such views, only a certain number of, let's say, densely connected acts of communication or racist attitudes, are sufficient to ground social relatedness. Maybe only if some threshold of interactions has been reached, do we want to claim that people are socially related.

Against this background, I seek to advance a novel, non-moralised, one-way (scalar) view. For this, let me first evaluate the main, general contenders for non-moralised accounts to show why these fall short of accounting for some of our considered judgments about non-trivial cases of social relatedness. Having proposed a remedy for these cases, I will consider the main objections that such a (non-moralised) one-way view faces and show how my account can overcome them.

¹² I regularly write of 'both' parties in a shared social relation throughout this chapter, seemingly neglecting that more than two parties can be involved in a social relation (as they usually are). This is, however, not implied by the usage of this terms but is adopted for reasons of brevity.

Yet, why focus on a non-moralised approach in the first place? Moralised views of social relatedness certainly come with some considerable advantages over other approaches. As relational egalitarian concerns are by design part of their definition, they are tailored to the normative analysis that is pursued. However, this also comes at a cost. If we are interested in the broader questions of social relatedness, independent of any concerns with specifically dominating or paternalistic acts in some particular contexts, then moralised views are less instructive. While tailored to a specific normative endeavour, they cannot provide any independent insights into the phenomenon of social relatedness. Moralised views are thus in some sense limited. In contrast, non-moralised views have a wider appeal because they are generally informative. I thus assume that, if possible, one should opt for a non-moralised explanation of social relatedness and take it therefore as a *desideratum* for a plausible conception of relational equality later on that a non-moralised view of social relatedness is advanced.

A natural contender for such a view accounts for social relatedness in terms of a shared framework. On this approach, a person X is socially related to another person Y if, and only if, they are participants, subjects, or individuals otherwise committed to some salient joint framework. Legal systems, public but informal systems of social norms, or joint voluntary associations possibly represent such frameworks. This is arguably one traditional way of explaining social relatedness. The legal status of citizenship, for example, clearly explains why citizens are socially related. Other instances of more comprehensive social relationships can likewise be explained by the participants' joint intentions or shared plans (see e.g. Bratman, 2014; Gilbert, 1990) or against the backdrop of jointly subjected norms. I.e. those and only those subjected to some shared project, system, or set of rules are socially related. Call this the shared framework or all-subjected thesis¹³.

The shared framework thesis has some obvious benefits. It makes sense of our commonsense understanding of social relations as requiring somewhat set-up, enabling background conditions,

¹³ A thesis that shares some similarities with the all-subjected principle in democratic theory, see e.g. Abizadeh (2022).

be it in terms of formally binding institutions or informal systems of rules and norms. It appears to correctly differentiate between social relatedness and other forms of (e.g. moral) relations. That said, this approach also comes with certain limitations and problems: first, the focus on a shared (background) framework excludes any third parties that might be affected by a particular instance of social relations. How one social relationship is set up can greatly affect how others, outside of the relationship, can go about their lives. Spill-over effects or similar phenomena can influence the excluded people's lives and courses of action. Yet, on this approach, we would have to hold that those affected by the framework of others are not socially related to them. For these reasons, one might want to reject this thesis. This is not uncontroversial though. One could argue that we still have good reason to restrict the scope of social relatedness, as it is the very fact of a shared framework, with all its interesting properties and problematic dimensions, not its effect on others, that establishes social relatedness. Simply appealing to somehow affected third parties is insufficient to reject the shared framework thesis. While this dispute over a conservative interpretation of social relatedness might prove to be resolvable, there is, I believe, a further, more damning, objection to the shared framework thesis that demonstrates why it is insufficient to explain social relatedness.

To see why this is the case, consider the following scenario:

Fishing communities. Two fishing communities A and B exist on two sides of a (very wide) river, which is separating the land. No legal or otherwise shared system between the communities (i.e. trade, migration, aid, or the like) has been established between their societies. People of both societies generally are aware of the existence of the other society. Imagine that people of community B are, let's say because of a lack of technological innovation, not capable of manipulating the river currents in their favour. Residents in A, on the other hand, can and regularly do (but incalculably so) steer the river in certain ways, so that more fish is washed up on both shores and thus more goods are available to both societies. No community can though, on their own, contact or communicate with the other.

On the shared framework thesis, members of communities A and B are not socially related. While both communities depend on a similar activity – fishing – no legal system exists between them, and members of either community are not subjected to any joint informal norms or binding rules (assume that the unpredictability of the river steering prohibits it from becoming an informal set

of rules). Yet, I would argue that, intuitively, we would say that these people do share some social relations – we would want to include those into the scope of social relatedness. Whenever community members of A steer the river, in order to gain more fish, they impact the relevant fishing capacities of members of B. Moreover, members of B can neither influence the decisions of individuals in A nor communicate their consent or dissent to this practice. In saying that these do not share any social relations, something seems off. A formally or informally shared framework does not seem to be necessarily required for social relatedness to exist. Thus, as a non-moralised view, the shared framework thesis appears to be insufficient to ground social relatedness.

Consider this revised version of the scenario above next:

Fishing communities with unilateral rules. The same as before but further technological advancements have made members of community A aware of their influence over B's fishing capacities due to their river steering. Some successful representatives of A have swayed public opinion towards establishing a legal codification of rules for river steering and fishing that includes the other community and which subjects members of either community to the same set of rules. However, members of B are not aware of these developments and the new status quo regarding the river.

Here, it seems that, although a shared framework between both communities is established and, consequently, members of A and B now are, on this framework thesis, socially related, the fact of a joint set of rules does not satisfactorily explain why members of both communities relate socially. At least, I believe we have good reason to think so: it is not the mere subjection to rules or a shared framework in general that establishes social relatedness but seemingly more the fact that members of A are capable of exercising a certain influence on the lives and activities of members of B. The *explanans* has not, I believe, changed between those two scenarios. It is still the same feature that accounts for our judgements about why members of these communities are socially related. In *Fishing communities with unilateral rules*, the shared framework thesis is explanatorily inadequate. Therefore, I want to argue that we should look for a different view to explain social relatedness.

Another contender for a non-moralised view seeks to explain social relatedness simply through causal efficacy. A person X is socially related to another person Y if, and only if, X is able to causally affect person Y in some relevant ways, or *vice versa*. Whenever one party can causally exert influence on another party's conduct, then both are socially related. Call this the simple causal efficacy or all-affected thesis. Now, such an approach construes social relatedness in a broad way. As we may say that "[a] person is causally responsible for an event [...] if some act of his figures (or figures substantially) in the best causal explanation of that event" (Dworkin, 2011, 103).

Any relevant causal influence of one person's behaviour is sufficient to establish social relations. This includes affected third parties in the web of social relatedness. By that, it generalises the aforementioned accounts in the literature that focus on communication or (non-trivial) direct interactions between persons. This thesis arguably makes sense of some of our concerns with *Fishing communities*. If one is capable of, in some sense, causing or steering the behaviour of others, we would want to say that this is, at least sometimes, sufficient for social connectedness. In this sense, I believe that this way of construing social relations is a superior approach to the previously discussed shared framework thesis.

Nevertheless, this thesis likewise also brings disadvantages. Predominantly, concerns that the scope is too expansive. Causal efficacy is a notoriously vague concept, not least when considered from the point of its metaphysical properties. Surely not just any causal impact, however mediated or detached from the actual event, just always is sufficient to establish social relatedness. A random act of stone-throwing by a member of A can causally impact another person B's behaviour – when they (non-intentionally) get hit – yet, without this necessarily entailing social relations. Moreover, episodic acts that have a causal impact, intuitively, also fail to establish social relations if they cease to exist after an individual instance. A scalar or threshold interpretation may help to solve these issues, but such a view needs proper motivation and thus, further argument. This suggests that

simple causal efficacy is too broad. What is needed is a qualifier that restricts causal impact so that it only picks out the relevant instances of social relatedness.

I want to propose two such qualifiers that, combined, entail a restricted causal efficacy thesis and allow for a differentiated view of social relatedness. First, I argue that not any causal influence by one person's conduct towards another is sufficient to ground social relatedness, but that only acts, or more broadly, only events caused, by an agent which affect another party's capacities to carry out their actions, are. Second, only ongoing interactions between two parties, or sufficiently dense patterns of interactions, are capable of grounding social relatedness. Jointly these two conditions are, I believe, sufficient¹⁴ to explain when causal influence between two parties amounts to social relatedness. Let me discuss these two conditions in turn.

To delimit the scope of the all-affected thesis, I suggest only including those causally efficacious acts that in some way affect – hinder, facilitate, or otherwise influence – people's agential pursuits. Only if a certain act of one person influences how another individual agent approaches their circumstances, then the causal impact establishes social relations. This is still a non-moralised account. Its features can be described entirely without reference to moralised concepts. In simple terms, it refers to the idea of an agent as a person who is capable of acting on their will (I shall have much more to say about this notion of agency later on – in fact, as I have alluded to in the Introduction, I will develop this central idea gradually over the course of the thesis). For now, it suffices to say that a person who acts intentionally, on reasons that she robustly relies on¹⁵, and goal-oriented, is an agent. I believe this captures our intuitions and plays a crucial role in our considered judgements about why social relations between communities A and B exist in *Fishing communities*. In a sense, what is happening to members of B is exactly that the actions of individuals

¹⁴ I leave it open whether this specific causal impact is also strictly speaking necessary to establish social relations. For some cases, it seems plausible that other conditions are sufficient to establish social relations. That said, recall that non-moralised views gain traction once they recognise several criteria. Adding other conditions, lexically ordered, is consistent with this account. I do believe though that causal influence typically best explains the phenomenon and thus has some lexical priority.

¹⁵ Viz., requirements less demanding than autonomous action, it is important to note.

from A (steering) have a causal impact on their prospective intentions and actions – namely, negative or diminishing influence. People from B find themselves as patients rather than agents of their lives on the riverside. At least, regarding their intended goal and project of fishing, whenever members of A steer the river. They lack control over the pursuit of their goals; they experience a loss of agency. Their capacities for carrying out actions are impacted by the random acts of river steering by members of A.

Moreover, note that the members of B's agency would be less impacted if members of community A only steered the river once. This is to suggest that only individual, episodic acts of such causal impact are insufficient to ground social relatedness. Only if there is a continued or regular series of such causally impactful interactions, then we judge that the two parties are socially related. I believe that this second qualification does not require much further theoretical defence. For one, it uncontroversially tracks our commonsense understanding that social relations require a certain degree of persistence or temporal expansion. Likewise, the proposals that have been established in the literature also rely on similar intuitions and support such a condition (see Schemmel, 2021; Kolodny, 2023). Being uncontroversial alone may not suffice though. Relevantly for us, however, this rationale is also properly motivated through the amendment of the prior condition. Real, lasting influence or impact on others' agency requires more than one episodic act to be causally effective. Carrying out intents in the relevant sense should be seen as an extended project. This gives us a yardstick for seeing when social relations proper are instantiated, namely when one's causal impact on another leads to lasting changes in their agential intentional commitments. Together with the first qualifier, this leads to a more restricted causal efficacy thesis, according to which a person X is socially related to another person Y if, and only if, X is capable of exerting causal impact on Y's exercise of agency on a lasting or ongoing basis.

Finally, such an account is then not only consistent with but also strongly implies either a scalar or a threshold view. Both these views promise to make sense of the variety of social relations. The

latter, however, face challenges common to any threshold view in that a non-arbitrary explanation of where the threshold should be set needs to be given. Scalar views escape this objection while providing an elegant way to account for the density of social relatedness against the background of a pluralist conception of social contexts that I assumed at the beginning of this chapter and the restricted causal impact view just discussed. Different social contexts come with varying social interactions between agents. A scalar view is capable of tracking this. Thus, I believe we should lastly add this component to the account: the more pervasive and inescapable these patterns of interaction are, that have a lasting causal impact on others' capacities to exert agency, the more/denser the social relation in question is. In other words, the more reliably a person is capable of exerting lasting causal influence on another person's exercise of agency, the more likely it is that a social relation between them is established.

This is, then, essentially a scalar view of social relatedness, which recognises that in some social contexts, people form comprehensive relationships, marked by frequent and demanding interactions, while in others, individuals stand in looser social relations, marked by more irregularly occurring and less impactful interactions. In any case, it is the lasting causal impact on others' exercise of agency that explains social relatedness. Thus, this view accepts that only a regular series of causally efficacious influences is sufficient to establish social relatedness and also that such relations take on different forms within different social contexts.

With this non-moralised conception in mind, we can now move to the second part of the account, the question of whether we should adopt a one- or two-way view of such nature. Recall that for one-way views, it is necessary and sufficient that one party is capable of having a causal impact on another person's capacities to exert agency. Two-way views, in contrast, require as a necessary condition that both parties are capable of doing so. Here, one-way views are naturally more inclusive than their two-way counterparts.

Do we have reason to suspect that, once again, this qualified causal impact thesis is of a too expansive scope if considered a one-way view? Here, I believe not so. Going back to *Fishing communities*, I would argue that requiring a two-way condition would unnecessarily restrict the scope of social relatedness. Doing so would, indeed, yield the conclusion that members of communities A and B are not socially related. Yet, as I have tried to show, our considered judgments about *Fishing communities* and *Fishing communities with unilateral rules* strongly recommend that they are socially related. Therefore, a two-way view of this particular causal impact thesis is a non-starter. The objection that this nonetheless implausibly entails a too broad scope can be countered by pointing to the scalar dimension of this account. Only regular, ongoing interactions are likely to trigger the existence of a social relation. Indeed, many but single and trivial acts of causal impact that could, if being part of an ongoing pattern of interaction, lead to such relation, are likely to be individually insufficient to ground social relatedness. Hence the objection from overexpansiveness can be refuted by reference to the scalar interpretation of the qualified causal impact thesis. Since we have reason to reject the more demanding two-way interpretation and because the one-way interpretation is plausible on a scalar reading, I conclude that we should adopt a non-moralised, one-way account of social relatedness.

Let me take stock at this point. In this section of the chapter, I have first laid the groundwork for approaching the question of when there is a social relation between individuals in the first place. I have argued that we have reason to assume a pluralist conceptualisation of social contexts and then introduced the distinctions between moralised and non-moralised, one-way and two-way views of social relatedness. Following these distinctions, I defended a particular non-moralised one-way view of social relations. This view explains the fact of social relatedness through the lasting causal impact of one party on another party's exercise of agency, a fact that is explained by when this takes place on an ongoing basis and at a sufficiently dense level. Finally, I claimed that we have good reason to adopt the wider one-way interpretation of such a view, and should reject a more

demanding two-way version. This yields the complete account of social relatedness, on which the remainder of the chapters of this thesis relies, which is, to recap:

A person X is socially related to another person Y if, and only if, X is capable of exerting causal influence on Y's exercise of agency on an ongoing basis, in a lasting or pervasive manner, and/or inescapable level of interaction, or *vice versa*.

Regarding the objection from expansiveness against such a view, I noted that the scalar interpretation as well as the required temporal extension act as moderating factors. With these in place, I believe that this view correctly identifies the scope of social relatedness. Having clarified the question of what it is to be socially related, we can now consider the second question in this chapter, of when some such social relations are egalitarian in nature.

1.2 When are social relations egalitarian in nature?

Social relations can take on many forms and be thought valuable for a variety of reasons. Not all of them have to do with relations being specifically desirable on egalitarian grounds. What we aim to do, however, is identify the exact conditions under which social relations are distinctively egalitarian. To fit and cohere with the prior section's argument, the idea is to start with a non-moralised account of egalitarian social relations, that is, a "flat description that carries, in itself, no suggestion of endorsement or complaint" (Dworkin, 2000, 125). Determining the nature of such social relations is then, first and foremost, an endeavour to specify under which abstract description people can be said to be placed in relations of equality, without the further implication or claim that to do so is desirable or appropriate (see *ibid.* 126). From this starting point, the account shall then gradually be refined to yield a robust and plausible theory of egalitarian social relations.

That said, such an approach may strike some as odd. After all, the idea of *egalitarian* social relationships has strong value-laden connotations. Enjoying these relationships seems to be an, at least *prima facie*, inherently good thing. Thus, the very notion already seems to presuppose a moralised understanding. To see that this does not follow necessarily, we need a more precise way

to understand our non-moralised approach here. For that, it is helpful to introduce a distinction between value-free and value-neutral concepts. As Carter (2015) helpfully explains,

“Value-freeness concerns the place (or rather, the absence) of evaluative terms in the definition of a concept, whereas value-neutrality involves a suspension of judgment about the comparative merits of divergent ethical positions.” (Carter, 2015, 280)

Committing to value-freeness is then to adopt a naturalistic or empirical approach for the analysis and definition of a concept. Value-neutrality, on the other hand, comes in degrees and has relevance when it is “appropriate to adopt an ethically non-committal approach” (ibid., 280). As it will become clear over the course of this section, the relevant type for us in particular, is that of value-neutrality. Excluding evaluative terms from a conception of egalitarian relations deprives us of resources to describe a plausible view. In formulating what egalitarian relations require, we have good reason to work with evaluative notions such as substantive interpretations of equal concern, mutual respect, and the like. Yet, what we want though, is that such a view still admits a high degree of value-neutrality. In that, value-neutral, sense, we should understand the sought-after conception of egalitarian relations in this chapter as non-moralised. Even though we may employ evaluative terms in its definition, the resulting view does not commit us to any substantive, controversial ethical position.

We can see this in effect when we go back to the initial statement of this section, that social relations carry goods and bads in many forms. As I suggested, not all these goods have to do with relations being specifically egalitarian. Consider a relationship that has value for its participants because of some good that it realizes, such as a joint activity or simply some time spent together. This relationship represents a good, yet one that does not (necessarily) have anything to with an egalitarian dimension. Likewise, such a relationship can be valuable even if it is not good for its participants. Think of a relationship that may be valuable to us, the general audience, such as when some loosely acquainted individuals form a band and make beautiful music. This relationship could nevertheless be without value, or even be of disvalue, to the parties involved, if their relationship

is dishonest, spiteful, or the like (see Keller, 2024, 5). Conversely, and specifically relevantly for us, a relationship can also be egalitarian in form without being overall good for its participants.

Consider this further revised version¹⁶ of the scenarios discussed in the previous section:

Fishing communities with rules but mutually incapable. As in the second scenario but now the once unilateral rules of expressing equal concern have been mutually adopted and recognised. Technological advancements were shared, and strong bonds were established. Yet, due to an unforeseen natural calamity, river currents changed and now, neither members of A nor members of B are capable of river steering. This situation could be reversed, if one community is given all the technological instruments, so that members of this community, and just this one community, could harness all the fish, which they pledge to, but may or may not, distribute equally.

Some points stand out here. First, the fishing communities A and B remain socially related. The requirements of social relatedness are still satisfied (even more so, since now both parties exert influence on the other, albeit not through the activity of river steering). Moreover, their members' relationship is now seemingly an egalitarian one. In the relevant social context – fishing yield – they are equally positioned: both lack the required ability to reap any gains from fishing. This apparently egalitarian situation is arguably not good for the well-being of either community though, at the very least, it is less so than before. Presumably, it would be better for the communities to shift away from the egalitarian relationship towards an inequalitarian one. This would allow resuming to circumstances where some gains could be won, which could potentially be distributed among them. What this example should bring forward is the intuition that social relations can be egalitarian without being specifically or generally good to the participants involved. This is a scenario which we should not dismiss but take seriously. We should be interested in the general nature of egalitarian social relations, without presuming that those relations are of inherent overall positive value. To reiterate from above, this is a task for which a value-neutral, non-moralised conception is well-suited for.

¹⁶ Inspired by the cases of mutual domination discussed in Schmidt (2018).

With this in mind, we can begin this investigation. Lippert-Rasmussen (2018) provides an instructive conceptualisation of egalitarian social relations that (more or less explicitly) capitalizes on these neutral assumptions:

“X and Y are [relating as] social equals if, and only if, the same basic normative social rules and axiological principles apply to them and if, in accordance with those rules and principles, X and Y are equally important in whatever respects are fundamentally socially significant (other than the fact that people relate to one another as social equals).” (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, 83)

This serves as a useful template to develop an account of the nature of egalitarian relations against the backdrop of social relatedness established in the prior section. On this reading, the question of which normative principles and rules apply is left open. A substantive account needs to adequately specify these conditions. Beyond that, this description also tracks a presumption of strict equality (see Gosepath, 2015). This is an assumption that, as Lippert-Rasmussen also recognises, invites charges from unrealistic idealisation or utopianism. Since, on this formal view, it seems that only strictly equal importance is compatible with egalitarian social relations. Whether this is correct though, is questionable. It needs further argument filling out the details of what is fundamentally socially significant, to see whether any deviations from strict equality are consistent with having egalitarian social relations. Plausibly, such an account will make sense of that by remaining sensitive to the plurality of social contexts and the varieties of social relations within them. I shall engage with these tasks in turn.

The relational egalitarian literature offers several candidate requirements that supposedly explain the conditions under which social relations constitute an egalitarian ideal. Well-known examples are Anderson’s (1999) focus on mutual accountability, Scheffler’s (2005) emphasis on having a standing disposition to treat each party’s strong interests equally (that is, a version of equal

concern), Viehoff's (2014) argument for equal power in decision-making¹⁷, or Kolodny's (2023) notion of equal authority to address claims against inferiority.

One charge that has been levelled against relational egalitarians' conceptions of egalitarian relations in this regard is an objection from fittingness: by focussing on one instance of social relations in a given social context and by working out what relating as equals requires there, we are incapable of accounting for egalitarian relations in other contexts or in general. Whatever makes a friendship egalitarian is not the same as what would be required for political relations between citizens to be egalitarian. The features or norms that explain the egalitarian character of one relationship do not travel to other instances; they do not transcend the borders of individual social contexts (see Viehoff, 2019). Or so the objection goes. Proponents of this view deny that a context-independent description of the nature of egalitarian relations can be established. If correct, this threatens the overall plausibility and prospect of the relational egalitarian project, as only partial, fragmented accounts of relating as equals for specific contexts can be given. Likewise, for this thesis, it implies that an examination of the nature of egalitarian relations *in abstracto* is futile.

This objection allows, however, for a strong and a weak interpretation. On the strong interpretation, the features or norms that explain the egalitarian dimension of social relations in one social context are fundamentally or categorically different from those applicable in another. On a weaker interpretation, these features or norms, albeit coming with context-specific particular requirements, are nevertheless part of the same overarching condition that is a requisite for egalitarian relations in general. Scheffler's egalitarian deliberative constraint (cf. Scheffler, 2015), for example, can be interpreted as requiring equal power over decision-making in any social relation in order to satisfy the criterion of treating each involved party's interests equally. Yet, we can also interpret it as saying that what it takes to treat these interests equally requires equal power in the relationship of spouses, whereas it requires only equal opportunity for influence in the political

¹⁷ But see Viehoff (2019).

domain. Only the strong interpretation is a problem for the project of this chapter. I thus take it as another *desideratum* for a convincing theory that an account of egalitarian relations is established which is consistent with and a plausible contender for the weak interpretation of the objection.

Now, from the account on social relatedness given above, it follows that egalitarian social relations are a specific mode of social relations, one that thus in some way will make references to the parties' agential capacities. I shall establish and discuss several different possible ways of spelling out an ideal of egalitarian relations that is derived from this approach, to eventually arrive at a honed and refined account.

Here is one such stipulative, tentative version:

Egalitarian social relations I. A person X is in an egalitarian social relation with another person Y if, and only if, X considers Y's moral agency with equal concern, and *vice versa*.

This description represents a natural starting point. It defines the normative significance in terms of equal concern for the parties' moral agency, viz. our interests in intentionally forming and making moral judgements and in taking on responsibility for our choices and actions. Doing so follows and hardly changes the axiological template introduced above. The problem with this definition is that it is better suited to account for egalitarian relations between moral equals, than for illuminating the phenomenon of social equality. Considering another person's moral standing with equal concern in one's actions, is arguably what we ought to do in any case as moral equals. It does not tell us what being socially equal needs to exhibit in addition to our standing as moral equals. Moreover, although some accounts of egalitarian social relations rely on the notion of equal concern for others' fundamental interests (see Scheffler, 2005/2014), this proposition fails to be satisfactorily informative in this regard, too. Equal concern seems too broad to pick out the fundamentally, socially relevant characteristics that need to be equalized in social relations for them to be egalitarian. The following definition improves on those two points, by specifying the social dimension of relating and by giving a more determinate account of the *equalisandum*.

Egalitarian social relations II. A person X is in an egalitarian social relation with another person Y if, and only if, X treats and regards Y's interests in exercising their agential capacities as equally weighty in their decision-making, and *vice versa*.

On this second description, then, these egalitarian relations have a proper *social* dimension. First, persons relate to one another through acts of treatment and regard, which is to add a behavioural and attitudinal component to the account¹⁸. In contrast with equal moral relations, equal social relations require that both parties socially treat and consider each other as equals (see Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, 71f.). Furthermore, in doing so, they place equal weight on each other's interests in exercising their agency. In this description, the agency notion is now more broadly defined as individuals' interests in utilising their capacities for intentional action; for guiding their activities toward some adopted goal (cf. Bühler, 2022). With that, it goes beyond the initial nod to moral agency – viz. the capacities for making moral judgements and assuming responsibility for our choices – by acknowledging an interest in carrying out goal-oriented actions in their shared social world as such. This is a first approximation to a specifically *social expression* of some kind of human agency.

Two points about this conception require further explanation, though. On the one hand, one may wonder why egalitarian social relations include both a behavioural and an attitudinal element. It seems that, at least in some social contexts, regarding others as equals is either impossible, because of the anonymity or distance between members of a social relation, or intuitively overdemanding. A generally persuasive rationale for a requirement to regard every member of a social relation equally seems lacking (cf. Bengtson & Munch, 2024). While it appears plausible that egalitarian social relations always require a particular way of treating others, regarding all others similarly, seems to be misplaced. This sceptic objection strikes me as largely correct. Indeed, reasons seem to exist that speak against the plausibility of an attitudinal element for egalitarian social relations in

¹⁸ Note that while my account of social relatedness is a one-way, behavioural view (as described in the prior section) egalitarian social relations necessarily require that both parties' behaviour (and attitudes) exhibit the relevant criteria.

every social relation. However, I believe that the notion of social context with which I have been operating throughout the chapter offers some instruction here. Social contexts allow us to explain the context-dependency of requirements of relating as social equals, and by that, they also enable us to maintain that this attitudinal element can be relevant to certain, albeit only some, social contexts. Presumably, these are those contexts in which we stand in closer, more personal and comprehensive relations with one another, such as in amicable or romantic relationships. Here, it does not seem overly controversial, demanding, or intrusive, to assert that egalitarian versions of such relationships require regarding another as a social equal¹⁹.

On the other hand, one can reasonably ask what exactly the *equalisandum* – one's interests in exercising our agential capacities – entails, and what it adds to our, arguably, fundamental interests in having our moral agency equally recognised. As in version I before, it seems that we should in any case respect the fact of our equal moral agency and, furthermore, that any envisaged special social expression of this does not add, at least on this description, any substantive requirement beyond that. One could thus rightfully keep pressing for an explanation of what exactly it is that we should equalize through these social acts of treatment and regard so that distinctly egalitarian social relations are established between individuals. The next definition seeks to ameliorate these weaknesses of version II.

Egalitarian social relations IIIa. A person X is in an egalitarian social relation with another person Y if, and only if, X treats (and sometimes, regards) Y's social expressions of their agency with equal consideration, and *vice versa*.

In this version III, the equal concern applying to persons' agential capacities is explained in terms of equal socially valid importance that is assigned, through social acts of treatment and regard, to the social expressions of individuals' agency. Let me unpack and discuss this description bit by bit.

¹⁹ The opposite case, while logically possible, of regarding another as a social equal without treating them so, is, on this account, insufficient to ground egalitarian social relations though. The reason for this being that social relatedness presupposes that, at least, one party affects the other in causally relevant ways.

First, this version follows the idea that what is required for people, who are socially related, to establish egalitarian relations, is that they treat others' interests in being a *social* agent as equally relevant. The way that we as individuals express this, is by treating (and regarding) others with equal consideration in our shared relations. That is, within a social context, we e.g. acknowledge their voice as equally important, their projects as equally worthy of admiration as ours, and the relationships they pursue as equally relevant to them as ours are to us. In the sense that we consider others' agential expressions as situated within a mutual social relation, we ought to consider them specifically as socially active agents – as individuals who make use of their agential capacities by adopting and pursuing certain goals within a shared social context (cf. the notion of 'comprehensive goals' in the Introduction).

An agent is a social agent then, in my understanding, when agency is performed against the background of a certain social relation. A person who exercises their agency in such social circumstances does so by intentionally carrying out actions to realize the goals they have set themselves in a social environment, viz. with other people or against the backdrop of other participants to which they are socially related.

Now, this certainly sounds rather abstract and overly technical. A natural way to understand this in more familiar terms, is by considering these agential pursuits through the lens of roles, specifically social roles: when we pursue comprehensive goals, that is, socially defined and context-dependent ends, we do this in publicly recognised ways, by occupying or inhabiting social roles, or, in other social contexts, privately, by devising projects and affirming the roles of friends, spouses, or the like. We can think of a social role as “a type of part that a person plays within a collective/institutional context”, “defined by the context in which they exist” and which genuinely “generates obligations of a sort” (Isaacs, 2023, 135f.). Such roles enable participation in collective projects and offer venues for attracting esteem, expressing identities and carrying status (Barber, 2023, 280). Social roles fulfil a variety of functions in social relations. One crucial feature of

inhabiting roles is precisely that they enable us to exercise our human agency in various ways, shaped by shared social settings.

There is an intricate link between our agential capacities, practical identities, and the roles we inhabit. It is through our intentionally formed pursuits and acts that we constitute our practical identities, as Korsgaard (2014) for example formulates it. And by doing so we render our selves – the possessors of those practical identities – active in the form of social roles: “You make yourself into an effective friend, teacher, parent, citizen, or whatever, by imposing the form of activity on principles derived from those roles”, and this explains, as Korsgaard claims, “why our actions are the appropriate grounds of the kinds of normative and personal attitudes that are supposed to be responsive to a person’s identity” (Korsgaard, 2014, 18f.; cf. also González, 2018).

I suggest that this provides a rationale as to why we have reasons to relate in certain ways to others when they inhabit social roles. Those roles represent a person’s *outward* display of their agential status within a given social context. This goes beyond the recognition of our mutual moral status, by adding a distinct social dimension to the requirements for being in egalitarian social relations. One’s social status – understood in the wide sense of status ascriptions based on socially salient features – can be thought of as the marker indicating the social position that one’s role occupies within a social context. It is a part of one’s practical identity, constituted by exercises of agency, given social form. We thus have reasons to be attentive about the social standing attributed to others’ agential commitments. Raz (1978) reminds us that it is

“[t]he ground of an entitlement determines its nature. It determines what counts as satisfaction of or respect for the entitlement, i.e. it determines what the entitlement is an entitlement for.” (Raz, 1978, 329)

It is in that regard, that I believe that a person’s received treatment (and regard) for their socially expressed agential status is the ground for ascribing the nature of egalitarian social relations. Egalitarian social relations are obtained when individuals considered as social agents mutually treat

(and regard) their agential interests, expressed in their pursuits and social roles, as equally important. Compared to the earlier version, this third conception gives us a distinct view of the *object* of egalitarian relations.

Beyond that, we also need some further explanation for the predicate and *equalisandum* in this definition of the nature of such relations. This I have referred to as equal consideration. I suggest treating this as a collective and umbrella term. To consider another as a social equal is to consider the same basic normative social rules applying to them as they do to us. This requires us to give equal importance to others' agential pursuits and occupied roles, in whichever form is socially salient in a given context. Hence this is best described as social consideration given to others when regarded as social agents. A term that denotes whichever expression of equal concern is socially appropriate in a given context: it spells out what our mutual treatment (and regard) should be so that we as individual agents are of equal social standing. This notion is, for now, left deliberately vague. Not only because its specific requirements depend on contextual features of social relations, but also because only an account of the value of egalitarian social relations can fully determine what we have reason to think that this equal consideration substantively amounts to. Chapters 2 and Chapter 3 will fill out these substantive details.

That said, we can still point to some more properties that speak in favour of this conception, and which render it more clearly. The notion of equal social consideration is theoretically adequate, for example, because it correctly tracks the context-dependency of social standing. What it precisely takes for individuals to have such equal standing, will differ from one social context to another. Taken *in abstracto*, the required treatment (and regard) for some social context can, in principle, be a matter of equal political power, equal influence, or equal authority over common decision-making. This may even go beyond demands for certain individual acts and prescribe institutional codification. In other contexts, again, it may merely require an implicit expression in one's joint

activities. That equal social consideration varies by social context is consistent with the weak interpretation of the objection from fittingness.

In a similar vein, we can also see why version IIIa is, strictly speaking, not entirely correct. Treating (and regarding) others with equal consideration is straightforwardly derived from the presumption of strict equality. As I have noted before, it requires further argument to show whether and which derivations from strict equality are appropriate in a well-designed theory of egalitarian social relations. With how this overall account of the nature of such relations is derived, we can now give more substance to this notion. Attaching the object of egalitarian relations to individuals as social agents and their agential pursuits in social settings respectively, gives us reasons to think of this notion of social consideration as having both a comparative and a non-comparative component. Not only should we allow for deviations from strict equality due to contextual features, but we should, I believe, also dismiss a *purely* comparative interpretation for a plausible view of the features of egalitarian social relations.

The reason for this flows from this conception that builds on the social position of individuals' expressed agency. In pursuing comprehensive goals, as individuals, we are arguably interested not only in receiving an equal level of consideration but also a sufficient one. For functioning as an agent, we want to get a decent amount of some, positive social consideration. Our desirable aim is not just equal weight but that adequate weight is being paid to our status as agents as well. To properly occupy a role and pursue the role-defined ends, for example, we want to be adequately considered, viz. to be well-enough heard, respected, and well-regarded. The relevant social standing for individuals as socially active agents that we have reason to accept in our conception is not settled through comparative considerations only.

Fishing communities with rules but mutually incapable also illustrates this point. Recall from this scenario that members of communities A and B find themselves there in an undesirable but seemingly egalitarian relationship. I wrote 'seemingly' there, pointing to the fact that this scenario falls short

of how we would intuitively (and reasonably so) understand egalitarian social relations. We now have the resources to describe in general why. Individuals who relate to one another solely with equal levels of social consideration may end up in a situation where their egalitarian relationship is deficient. And it is so deficient because the relationship, while technically equal but inadequate, prohibits any social agent from effectively pursuing their goals and relationships within the given social context. As we are aspiring to give an account of the nature of *valuable* egalitarian social relations, we thus should include a non-comparative condition in the theory: to enjoy egalitarian relations is to be mutually treated (and regarded) not only with equal social consideration but also with adequate such consideration. That is, consideration on or above a certain threshold of sufficiency.

While this may appear to stretch a theory of egalitarian relations beyond the value of equality, this is, in fact, shared with how other social egalitarian theorists have thought about those relations. Lippert-Rasmussen (2018), for example, notices (and laments) that, when writing in his analysis of Scheffler's (2015) view that

“[o]ne component of an account of an egalitarian personal relationship draws on values other than equality. For instance, in Scheffler's account it is one in which individuals treat one another with respect and expect to be treated with respect in return and each sees the other as a moral agent with the rights and responsibilities accruing to moral agents. These components do not reflect specifically egalitarian values, but that they do not is one important point Scheffler makes: to wit, that the ideal of relating as equals implies that equality is not a ‘normatively autonomous value’. To spell out the relational view, one must draw on values other than equality such as respect, reciprocity and publicity.” (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018, 54, cf. Scheffler, 2015, 24)

Whether or not one shares Scheffler's and Lippert-Rasmussen's substantive views here, valuable egalitarian social relations plausibly take concerns from other values and thereby other considerations than purely comparative ones into account. The notion of egalitarian social relations is a complex one. This is not to deny the important role of the comparative component in the account – it is a theory of *egalitarian* social relations, after all. However, we can see the importance of an adequacy constraint on the strictly comparative dimension. While the threshold of adequacy

is a matter and function of a respective social context – what adequate consideration requires follows from contextual features – mere comparative equality is insufficient to capture such relations, when this equality is not situated at a decent or sufficiently high level.

Assuming such a non-comparative component in the account, however, does not only point to concerns with regard to social consideration below a threshold but also to those above. Whereas we found reasons for thinking that sufficient levels of consideration are necessary for egalitarian relations to be obtained, we may be concerned with deviations from equality above such threshold as well. It seems to be a clear problem, from the point of egalitarian social relations, when individuals are treated (and regarded) with unequal and higher than adequate social consideration than other social agents. For example, when someone's social role is unreasonably highly admired, even when others are decently well regarded. The comparative dimension of the account gives us reason to think that such relations are inconsistent with deviations of social consideration above the threshold of adequacy. Yet, the fact that we stress the importance of non-comparative levels of such social consideration does arguably also imply some lenience toward minor deviations from equality above this threshold. Compared to purely comparative conceptions, slight deviations from equality are more tolerable on such a combined view.

Another potential rationale for accepting these could be that some exceptions are justified on special grounds. For example, supererogatory deeds in their agential pursuits could earn some individuals an admiration that is higher than others in the relevant social context. There might be room for special justifications based on certain considerations that permit some inequalities above the threshold of adequate social consideration, which do not violate having egalitarian social relations. Again, this will depend on the substantive interpretation that we give to the normative account of such relations (some of those, I will consider and discuss in Chapter 5). Thus, for now, I suggest describing the comparative element of this account as requiring 'roughly' equal levels of

social consideration, above the relevant threshold of adequacy specified by the nature of the social context in question.

Therefore, all things considered, on my account, enjoying egalitarian social relations requires giving and receiving both adequate and roughly equal levels of social consideration through individual treatment (and regard). Moreover, this consideration is best thought of as being attached to individuals considered as social agents, pursuing socially defined or enabled goals by inhabiting various social roles. These points are then appropriately captured in a slightly amended, shorter version IIIb, which reads as follows:

Egalitarian social relations IIIb. A person X is in an egalitarian social relation with another person Y if, and only if, X treats (and sometimes regards) Y's social role with adequate and equal social consideration, and *vice versa*.

This gives us, I believe, an attractive account of the nature of egalitarian social relations, one that coheres well with the general account of social relatedness that I have established in the prior section. In addition to that, we also see why the theory that we are arriving at is not entirely value-free yet still remains highly value-neutral. It is a theory of valuable egalitarian relations that can be endorsed by many, different substantive ethical views. Since what the concrete requirements of such adequate and equal social consideration specifically are, is established by further argument underpinning the exact value of such egalitarian social relations. With this, I thus conclude this argument on the nature of egalitarian social relations.

The theory that I have defended in these past two sections differs considerably both from how the nature of social relations and egalitarian such relations is commonly understood and from how other philosophers and theorists have traditionally recognised them, implicitly or explicitly. For that reason, it is instructive to take a closer look at the implications and scope of the theory that we have settled on over the course of the past two sections.

1.3 The implications and scope of this account of (egalitarian) social relations

As I have argued at the beginning of this chapter, a foundational view on the nature of social relations is often lacking or merely implicitly implied in substantive theories of social or relational equality. To vindicate these omissions, I have argued for a rather technical and fairly abstract general conception of social relatedness here. This was motivated by the thought that such a conception would allow us to discern certain blind spots in (relational) egalitarian theorising and help make progress in clarifying disagreements that typically lie in the background of particular substantive social egalitarian theories. Let me discuss some of the points for which my derived account confirms standard assumptions that are typically made in the literature and those where my theory has different implications and for which it yields, I hope, a novel but plausible perspective.

What is shared with many other theories in the literature, is the contextual focus and direction of my account. I have argued throughout this chapter, that our examination of (egalitarian) social relations should consider them relative to social contexts. It is the contextual features that allow us to describe the particular elements of a social relation. What differs in my theory from others, is the specific feature that grounds the nature of social relations in my view. I have argued that relating socially is a certain mode of human relations, one that primarily has to do with the quality of individuals' (causal) impact on others' capacities for carrying out intentional actions. A reference to this conceptual core of human agency explains both the aspects of social relatedness in general and of egalitarian kinds of such relations in individual social contexts.

Based on this, I suggest that we can further distinguish between two types of (egalitarian) social relations that will be of particular interest to us: close, personal relationships, on the one hand, and societal or wide social relations, on the other. This distinction tracks the features of those social relationships, in which we stand in daily, face-to-face interactions with others, and those in which we primarily relate to one another through more anonymous or institutionally-mediated ways. The

paradigms of the former are familial, amicable, or romantic relationships. A clear example of the latter is our relations as co-citizens in society. While this distinction is to a degree artificial and somewhat stipulated – because we cannot draw the separation line in a clear-cut way – it is still a reasonable classification to make. The conceptual core of human agency helps to see why: the specific properties that give us reason to think that social relations obtain, differ along their effects on human agency between those types of social relationships. In an amicable relationship, for example, the impact of others on our capacities for carrying out actions is direct, weighty, and has an overall personal dimension. It is carried by individuals' attitudes and dispositions only (recall also the discussion in 1.2. about the plausibility of requiring equal regard in these social relations). In societal relations, this impact is qualitatively different. It is mostly *mediated* through various formal and informal social institutions. While those are still essentially tied to social relations between natural persons, our way of influencing others' agential situation is quite different – law and social norms typically have grave but indirect impacts on our agency. Hence why I believe that this distinction is well-motivated in my view.

Now, this still allows for variations within those types, but most of the (for us) relevant social relations, I want to claim, can be taken to fall in either of those two camps. This is predominantly of pragmatic use to us: classifying them into these two broad types facilitates analysing and comparing specific aspects of some against the background of a manifold variety of social relations. In essence, then, in the coming chapters, I will treat the further theoretical and morally relevant questions with regard to (egalitarian) social relations in a two-fold manner, by considering them through the archetypes of close, personal and societal or wide social relations.

Beyond that, my view has also implications for what we should take the scope of social relations to be. One reason why detailed theoretical engagement with the question of the nature of social relations is missing in the literature, is, I assume, that most authors find it fairly straightforward to describe and identify who in a social relationship is. However, if the view established in this chapter

is correct, then we should construe the scope of such relations as broader than usually acknowledged. The one-way, non-moralised conception defended here suggests that social relations hold between individuals whenever one party is in the position to have a lasting causal influence on others' capacities for action. This transcends some borders and venues which we typically think of as well-contained instances of social relations. Two such areas stand out, which merit further investigation.

First, social relations can, quite literally, go beyond borders and hold between members of one society and another. If this is substantively so, because the relevant causal impact is weighty, then we may take, for example, state borders to be arbitrary from the point of their relevance. This then has implications for how we see the morality of human relations beyond domestic society and thus brings us to theoretical questions about a just world, global cohabitation, and the place of egalitarian relations in such a theory. Whether we have good reason to think that such social relations, which are morally relevant and for which we should reorient our thinking about global justice, exist, is of course an open question. It requires further empirical and normative arguments to show that they obtain. Yet, in an increasingly interdependent and globalised world, we should arguably not rule out the possibility that meaningful social relations already exist that span across borders and which we ought to consider as morally salient. The spatial dimension of our social relations may well be larger than hitherto recognised. *Fishing communities* and variants also hint at this implication of the view.

For that reason, certain associational approaches to the ground of justice (see e.g. Mason, 1997; Miller, 2007; Sangiovanni, 2007) in particular, which treat some feature of human relations to give rise to claims and duties of justice, may draw for support on the here-developed outlook and integrate it in their views. The scope of (egalitarian) social relations can thus also be wider than what social egalitarians, with some exceptions (see Cloarec, 2017; Heilinger, 2020; Nath, 2011;

Sharp, 2022), have traditionally assumed in their predominant focus on working out an ideal of relational equality only for the circumstances of domestic society.

Second, and relatedly, this view also implies a wider scope with regard to the temporal extension of social relations. As with the case of international or global social relations, this stems from the fact that our conception relies on a one-way understanding of the sufficiency condition of establishing social relations. Because of that, this view accepts that our social relations extend towards future generations²⁰. This is an implication of the account since we certainly can exert lasting causal influence on future individuals' agential conduct. Now, approaches to the morality of intergenerational relations abound in the literature. That said, social egalitarian accounts are largely absent from this debate (for an exception, see Bidadanure, 2016/2021). Against this current, the theory of the nature of social relations developed here strongly suggests that social egalitarians will need to examine those questions more thoroughly. Whichever substantive view one adopts about the place of equality in questions of intergenerational justice, this account suggests that social equality can indeed be a valid concern and an important value.

It thus follows in general from this conception of social relatedness that we are or can be in many more social relations than we typically recognise. While not in all of them, morality may require for some of those so far neglected social relations that we aspire to an egalitarian ideal in them. Although I proceed in subsequent chapters by giving a substantive justification of egalitarian relations, I will not have the space to defend any specific view about the merit of an account of egalitarian social relations for either of those two areas of justice. I can only point to these implications of the theory here and suggest that, at the very least, this view gives us some resources to address these largely underexplored questions about social equality in those realms of justice.

²⁰ For the same reason, this view denies that we, presently, can establish such relations with past generations.

Another, last point that is relevant to address follows particularly from the described nature of egalitarian social relations and concerns the relationship between social equality, on the one hand, and both (basic) moral and distributive equality, on the other hand. It is a conceptual implication of the account that relating as social equals is independent of relating as moral equals and that their requirements can come apart. The equal concern or equal respect for persons that is founded in our shared equal moral worth (cf. Dworkin, 1977) is not the same as the equal social consideration attributed socially through treatment (and regard) to individuals as social agents. We can thus, on this view, relate to one another as moral equals, by e.g. giving equal weight to each other's interests in our decision-making, without also relating to them as social equals, e.g. because we fail to treat (and regard) the social expressions of their agency with equal social consideration. Likewise, egalitarian social relations can obtain between individuals, who, for some (objectionable) reasons, do not think of some of their co-citizens as having equal moral worth. They might pretend so, not wanting others to recognise this, and thus treat²¹ their co-citizens as socially active agents with equal social consideration (think of concealed and reluctant racists, for example).

This is of course not to deny that moral and social equality have strong links. Naturally, when we consider the question of why we *should* relate as social equals, viz., when we engage with the questions of the value and justification of egalitarian social relations, basic moral equality will remain an important premise. Yet, conceptually, this account allows us to treat those relations as distinct. I believe that this is an advantage of this conception because it yields a differentiated understanding that enables us to see more clearly when these relations come apart and, thereby, when specifically egalitarian social relations are established or infringed on.

Similarly, it also follows from this theory that questions about social equality are relatively independent from those of distributive equality. While both ideals plausibly share a strong

²¹ Albeit not to regard them with equal consideration. Yet, recall that regard is only in some social contexts a constitutive element of egalitarian social relations.

normative link to basic moral equality, egalitarian social relations come with requirements other than those flowing from distributive considerations. There is a long-standing discussion within the contemporary egalitarian debate about whether the requirements of either view can be subsumed under a conception of the rival approach (see for an overview, Elford, 2017; Heilinger, 2024). This discussion is, as I have noted earlier, one which this thesis seeks not to engage with. I remain largely agnostic about the distributive requirements of egalitarian social relations (if there are any), as well as about the prospects of integrating ‘relationship goods’ into the *equalisandum*²² of a distributive conception of equality. That said, while I opt for a neutral stance towards these questions, it follows from the conception defended in this chapter that equal social relations come with genuine and separate requirements. That treatment and regard with equal social consideration matters in their own right, is distinct from how we usually think about the value of equal distributions of advantages, be it resources, capabilities, opportunities for welfare, or formal rights and liberties (cf. Estlund, 2016). We could distribute these without any further thoughts about how we do this, how our treatment of others in administering this egalitarian distribution matters²³, and how this may affect the social standing of individuals. Here, the account of the nature of egalitarian social relations clearly points in a different direction.

Let me illustrate these implications of the account of egalitarian social relations vis-à-vis other egalitarian dimensions with another hypothetical scenario.

Egalitarian neighbourhood. Imagine you recently moved to a different city, settling in a community-oriented neighbourhood. Part of what makes the neighbourhood community-oriented is the joint usage of a shared garden for recreational activities. Moreover, the resident community is composed of people from different linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds.

Now, what does the account of egalitarian social relations that has been developed in this section entail for this hypothetical scenario of social relations between neighbours? It is clear that

²² Yet see my discussion of these as possible *distribuenda* of justice in Chapter 4.

²³ On this point, see e.g. Schemmel’s (2021) discussion of Pogge’s (2004) account of inequalities in health care provisions.

individuals here are meaningfully socially related, not least because they are residents of the same city and thus in the same institutionally (i.e. legally) mediated context. Arguably they are part of another particular social context too, the one marked by a neighbourhood relation. As a newly settled in person, you relate to your neighbours as a social equal if you treat and regard their agential pursuits for realising projects with adequate and equal consideration. Residents may have quite different plans for the usage of the community garden in mind. While you intend to use the garden space as a recreational venue, others may want to use it for theatrical performances, again others for regular book club meetings, and so on. Maintaining egalitarian social relations, in this context, requires treating and regarding others' intentional plan-making, actions, and goal-setting for their usage of the community space as equally important. I believe that is what the account at a minimum requires in terms of social consideration.

There are, naturally, further (moral) questions and demands on how neighbours should get along in this scenario. One surely is about the proper distribution of time and access to the garden space. Yet, it is a further question of distributive equality, to work out a fair scheme of garden usage for all the parties involved, e.g. one that prioritises families with kids or one that divides access strictly equally²⁴. These questions need not be treated in isolation, though. It may strengthen the quality of egalitarian social relations when the need for a valid scheme of distribution of space is publicly expressed. Yet another question is about how one relates to other neighbours in general. Someone who considers another person there as less important, because of prejudice relating to, let's say, her different linguistic or socio-economic background, and thus excludes her morally significant interests from the considerations that go into their decision-making, clearly violates basic moral equality. This is then a problem of unequal concern and respect, a problem of moral inequality. However, if the same person (treats and regards) the others' outward agency based on that in a negligent way too, this also violates the requirements of egalitarian social relations. Insofar as the

²⁴ Again, by that, I do not mean to assume a specific substantive view about (the requirements of) distributive equality, I simply want to argue that those can be treated separately.

person as a social agent is inadequately and unequally treated and regarded, this is a problem of inequalitarian social relations.

What this concluding discussion of *Egalitarian neighbourhood* shows is the presence of exactly the features mentioned above. In my understanding, an ideal of egalitarian social relations is distinct from considerations flowing directly from shared basic moral equality and has relative independence from questions about equal distributions. This allows for a view that sees egalitarian social relations mattering in their own right. As such, it departs from commonly held reasoning in the egalitarian literature, which sees violations of social equality as particular violations of moral equality or a problem of distributive equality instead. On this conception, the ideal of egalitarian social relations can neither be reduced to requirements from basic moral equality nor does it collapse into components of a distributive egalitarian calculus.

In that sense, I believe that this account has interesting implications and genuine appeal. One that stems from pointing to a particular feature that is at the heart of (egalitarian) social relations on this view, namely, the effects that we have on others' exercise of their agential capacities and our recognition of their social exercises of agency. That said, no comprehensive argument has yet been given to the effect of why those exercises have such alleged importance, why we should subsequently care about that individuals enjoy these social relations and not find themselves in inequalitarian ones, and whether this then gives us reasons to promote or advance egalitarian social relations. The next two chapters take up these questions of the value of egalitarian social relations.

CHAPTER 2.

WHAT, IF ANYTHING, MAKES EGALITARIAN RELATIONS VALUABLE?

The previous chapter has defended a general conception of social relatedness and offered a distinct view of the nature of egalitarian social relations. As I have argued there, egalitarian social relations obtain between individuals who are socially related when they treat (and possibly, regard) each other, mutually, with roughly equal and adequate *social consideration* in their (permissible) individual endeavours. Now, being the recipient of such treatment (and regard) intuitively has value. It seems to be a *prima facie* good thing when individual persons are treated and regarded with some form of adequate and equal weight in a manifold of social contexts. Yet, from these remarks, it is far from clear where the precise value of such relations resides. Do we generally value a society which exhibits some such egalitarian relationships? Are such relationships making the lives of these individuals better? Or are such relations morally required due to some other relevant consideration? In short, the question of why, if at all, egalitarian social relations have moral value or worth is an open one and one that needs further substantive, normative discussion. The chapter at hand is the first of two that engage with this complex question of value and in which I eventually seek to establish a novel position for defending the specific moral value of egalitarian social relations.

This task, of delivering a comprehensive theory of the positive dimension and distinct value of social equality, is one that, as I have argued in the Introduction, relational egalitarian theorists of past and present have mostly eschewed. Nevertheless, the project of relational egalitarianism provides a suitable point of entry into this wider discussion of the moral value and justification of egalitarian social relationships that will accompany us throughout the next chapters. As such, this chapter takes cues from this egalitarian debate in its approach to the several chapters-long analyses of the moral dimension in egalitarian social relations.

The aims of this very chapter are, however, preparatory in nature and limited in scope. My primary objective here is to identify the precise *locus* of the value in egalitarian social relations. This chapter therefore seeks to serve as a short and comprehensive introduction to the various approaches and distinctions about the (dis)value of (in)egalitarian relations that have been established in the literature. Beyond that, I attempt to carve out a plausible rendering of where the value of egalitarian relations resides, through an internal reconstruction and critique of two of the most prominent accounts available in the relational egalitarian debate. Lastly, I reflect on and attempt to give a more substantive account of the central idea that emerges on my view for understanding the value of egalitarian social relations, that of *social agency*. Thus, in this chapter, I shall provide the foundation for an extended discussion of a view that sees the value of egalitarian social relations residing in their contribution to a specific aspect of human agency, a view that was already partly referenced in the former chapter and which will be fully laid out and defended in Chapter 3.

For this purpose, the present chapter is divided into four parts. Section 2.1. introduces the main theoretical positions and distinctions – evaluative and normative, personal and impersonal, instrumental and non-instrumental – that are instructive for determining the morality of egalitarian relations. Based on that, I argue in 2.2. that Elizabeth Anderson and Samuel Scheffler’s seminal accounts provide us with a rich and promising albeit underspecified and indeterminate view on the personal value and justification of such relations. Taking this into account, I shall then argue in 2.3. that an agency-based understanding yields a distinct explanation for the wrong-making features of inequalitarian relations, one that, I will claim, is preferable on theoretical grounds to those suggested by Anderson and Scheffler, and one which also allows us to describe the positive value of egalitarian relations in terms of their contribution to human agency. Following this claim, I finally present in section 2.4. a comprehensive discussion of the idea of exercising agency as a broad and general concept of human action and introduce a conceptual distinction between two types of minimal or individual and expansive or social agency. I clarify the meaning of both and explain why we can

reliably and robustly make such a distinction. Moreover, I maintain that we have reasons to take the latter conception as the relevant one for the target outlined earlier in this chapter. This concludes this chapter's discussion and lays the groundwork for the normative argument in Chapter 3.

2.1 Proposals, suggestions, and distinctions in the relational egalitarian project

In approaching the question of the value of egalitarian social relations, we are, as indicated above, best advised to consult and survey the existing positions in the by-now extensive literature on social or relational egalitarianism. While this strand of theorising initially took off from an intra-egalitarian debate about the proper understanding of the concept of equality – distributive or relational – in the field of theories of justice, it has now burgeoned into a fine-grained discussion of relational justice in general and *inter alia* of the value of social equality in particular (see for an overview, Nath, 2020). This has yielded a substantial range of available positions that can be classified along several dimensions by using the distinctions provided in this scholarly literature.

A first and natural distinction, which I have already touched on earlier, concerns the prospects of a negative versus a positive outlook on the evaluation of egalitarian social relations. Negative views, I maintained, focus on identifying the conditions that are inconsistent with relational equality but refrain from giving a positive description of what egalitarian social relations require (cf. Wolff, 2015; see Voigt, 2020). As I have argued, we have good reasons to favour a positive approach, if only because it allows us to see more clearly what is at stake in questions of social equality and because it provides us with resources to convince others, who are more sceptical towards attempts of bringing about such equality, from its value. Thus, to defend a plausible normative account of egalitarian social relations, we want to know not only what such relations exclude, hence which types of social hierarchies are incompatible with them, but also what they require us to enact in positive terms.

Now, the rudimentarily existing positive approaches for conceiving relational egalitarianism vary internally. There are at least three axes on which we can assess such views about the ideal of relational equality. I will cite them here briefly, before going into more detail below. The first set of categories separates those on grounds of evaluative and normative claims. Evaluative claims describe what is morally good, normative claims specify what is morally required. Accordingly, some views assess the value of egalitarian relations in terms of states of affairs, whereas others account for that in terms of what agents have moral reasons to act on. Correspondingly, in the realm of justice, telic relational egalitarianism is a view that makes egalitarian prescriptions purely based on evaluative claims, deontic relational egalitarianism, on the other hand, does so on grounds of a (deontic) moral norm (cf. Temkin, 2003). On the latter view, the moral significance of egalitarian relations typically lies in them “being the fitting response to the equal moral status of each person as a being with a certain kind of moral authority” (Miklosi, 2018, 136). These positions do not contradict each other but, as a matter of principle, deontic egalitarianism remains agnostic about the truth of telic egalitarianism (cf. Lippert-Rasmussen, 2021; Bengtson, 2023a).

Next, in evaluative views, we can further distinguish between those who presume the value of egalitarian relations in the contribution they make to people’s lives and those who see it in the contribution to the goodness of affairs, independently from their effects on individual lives. Hence, their moral value can be personal or impersonal (cf. Gheaus, 2016). Lastly, the personal value of egalitarian relations can be thought to be instrumental, i.e. because of their consequences for individual well-being (or any other relevant value), or to be non-instrumental, i.e. that they make people’s lives better in themselves (relevantly, the ‘or’ is an inclusive one – both can be true). Notably, a comprehensive singular view can combine various positions within these axes of distinction, e.g. such an account can rely on evaluative claims based on the personal value of egalitarian relations and acknowledge that such relations are morally required because of some other, independent moral norm. Nevertheless, these theoretical distinctions allow us to evaluate

certain substantive accounts of relational equality and thus serve us well in gaining a deeper understanding of the account of value that these authors, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, hold.

For some textual evidence, we can, for example, characterise O'Neill's (2008) position as a telic, impersonal and non-instrumental (or, non-intrinsic, in O'Neill's preferred description) account of relational equality, when he writes that "certain kinds of egalitarian relations have a value that is not reducible to the effects on individual welfare that those social relations may have" (O'Neill, 2008, 141f.). Another telic, but this time, personal instrumental, egalitarianism can be attributed to Scanlon's (2003/2017) writings on inequality, in which he treats social inequality as detrimental to fraternity, "damaging to the bonds between people", that is "a loss suffered by the better off and worse off alike (Scanlon, 2003, 51). On the other side of this range of egalitarian positions, we find deontic proposals such as Schemmel's (2011) on which inegalitarian relations are morally objectionable on grounds of (an expressive norm of) justice: "The objection to [those] relationships is not merely that they are, in some sense, bad for people, but that they constitute unjust treatment" (Schemmel, 2011, 366). Similarly, Lippert-Rasmussen thinks that relational egalitarianism has the most plausibility in a deontic understanding in which relating as equals is required by justice as a matter of fairness (see Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018).

All of those accounts thus assume a different position on the question of the value of egalitarian relations. Note, however, the relative ease with which relational theorists describe the harm- and wrong-making features of inegalitarian relations, compared to the virtual silence on the goodness or rightness of egalitarian ones. Most current relational egalitarian authors still focus first and foremost on describing the disvalue that inegalitarian social relations have. There is thus a great range of views discussing the objectionable features of inegalitarian relations in the literature, yet only little notes on how, correspondingly, egalitarian relations derive their moral value. And to the extent that these authors do discuss details of any positive view, a concrete and substantive defence

for the specific value of such relations is usually left implicit or omitted. Even in the most sophisticated engagements, such as e.g. Schemmel's recent (2021) comprehensive book-length treatment of the subject, the idea of relational equality is still predominantly formulated negatively. Relational egalitarian justice requires, so Schemmel writes, non-domination, no unjust social norm hierarchies, and that this is expressed in the attitudes of "institutions in the treatment of those subject to their power" (Schemmel, 2021, 13). Grounded in a deontic norm and/or an evaluative view (or both), the relational egalitarian demands usually specify how we ought *not* to relate to others, on grounds of an account of why doing so would be bad (for us).

These approaches, however, leave it open what the importance or significance of egalitarian relationships in individuals' lives is. We may want to know whether and how relating as social equals differs from a prescription not to relate as social unequals, and further, where this positive value resides. It is this fact, that has contributed to a dissatisfaction with the general state of relational egalitarian theorising, to which I have alluded to in the Introduction (cf. Tomlin, 2014) – a theoretical problem that this thesis wants to make progress on. That said, the breadth of the relational egalitarian literature does provide us with relevant resources. Since, even in mainly or generally negative views on relational egalitarianism, we can still expect to find some hints for establishing a positive description inspired by those very accounts. We have thus reason to go beyond this and dig deeper into the details of existing relational egalitarian accounts, to make the implicitly assumed value of social equality explicit. For that, I believe, we are well-advised to revisit and reread especially early accounts with the advanced current state of relational egalitarian theorising in mind.

Two of those accounts strike me as particularly worth re-considering in this sense, on which I suggest that we orient ourselves. These are the two arguably historically most influential views, namely the theories developed by Anderson and Scheffler over the course of several of their writings. Both authors paint a comprehensive picture of the manifold effects of inequalitarian social

relations in individuals' lives and give some rudimentary remarks that, I think, are informative for developing a more exact, positive theory of the morality of egalitarian social relations. These thus offer a particularly rich understanding of social (in)equality, but one whose complexity must adequately be deciphered first.

With the tools presented in this section, we can perceive that both authors combine a specific evaluative view, which connects egalitarian relations in particular ways to the conditions of human flourishing, with a deontic egalitarian prescription on normative grounds. A re-examination of those two accounts will offer, I believe, an attractive position and helpful starting point for uncovering the positive value of egalitarian social relations that we are missing. For those reasons, I turn to a close examination of Anderson's and Scheffler's seminal contributions next.

2.2 Anderson and Scheffler on the (dis)value of (in)egalitarian relations

Elizabeth Anderson's (1999) and Samuel Scheffler's (2005) early accounts of relational equality rate among the foundational works that developed relational egalitarianism as a distinct approach to the value of equality. Although the authors remain mostly vague in these texts on the question of what makes egalitarian relations specifically valuable and, as I shall argue below, they ultimately do not succeed in their attempts to comprehensively account for this value, their seminal arguments exhibit some of the central underlying reasons and intuitions that I believe are worth conserving and instructive for devising a theory of the value of egalitarian relations. In the following, I shall give an exegetical analysis and interpretation of the authors' views on objectionable inegalitarian relations and their considerations with regard to the significance of egalitarian relationships that are mostly left implicit.

Anderson in her (1999) original account, famously takes inequalities that have historically been opposed by egalitarian political movements as the venture point for developing her account of the ideal of relational equality. These include at their centre, inegalitarian relations between groups, in

which those of “superior rank were thought entitled to inflict violence on inferiors, to exclude or segregate them from social life, to treat them with contempt, to force them to obey, work without reciprocation, and abandon their own cultures” (Anderson, 1999, 312). As Anderson presents it, in each of these cases, the inegalitarian relations involved deprive persons of something valuable. Furthermore, from this passage, it appears that inegalitarian relations are both bad for persons – they make their lives worse – and also wrong people by denying them their rights.

This, rather instrumentalist account of the harm- and wrong-making features of inegalitarian relations is further laid out in the text when Anderson claims that it is a *desideratum* of her (positive) theory showing that the fundamental obligation of citizens is to “secure the social conditions of everyone’s freedom” (ibid. 314). On this reading, relational equality derives its value from the fact that it promotes another (seemingly, non-instrumental) value, namely a notion of (positive) freedom. Moreover, people are entitled “to be free from oppression to participate in and enjoy the goods of society, and to participate in democratic self-government” (ibid. 314). For that reason, I take Anderson’s argument to imply a personal, instrumental evaluative view on egalitarian relations combined with a deontic moral prescription to relate to others as equals. The relevant norm is also made explicit in her work, as being anchored in a conception of equal moral worth: “[e]galitarians base claims to social and political equality on the fact of universal moral equality [...] egalitarians seek a social order in which persons stand in relations of equality” (Anderson, 1999, 313).

This view is further developed in later accounts, where Anderson points out that being a social inferior is threatening to a person’s capacities for autonomous actions (see Anderson, 2008) – a more determinate description still reminiscent of the earlier notion of ‘social conditions of freedom’. Or at another point, when noting that occupying an inferior social position causes individuals to possess fewer resources and opportunities than others to pursue their projects and commitments, a consequence of powerlessness, having one’s interests neglected and being looked down upon (see Anderson, 2012). This we can interpret as an expression of the impediments to

human flourishing that these freedom-limiting inegalitarian relations have. In sum, we find in Anderson's writings on social inequality a clear indicator of the detrimental effects of such objectionable relations on individuals' capacities for freely pursuing a good life.

Now, Anderson's view surely captures some of our intuitions about the evils of relational inequalities she describes, like the ones specified by Young (1990) as the five faces of oppression - exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence, and domination (cf. Young, 1990, Ch. 2). I further assume that it resonates with our judgements that these inequalities are in some sense bad for people and consequently that the good of relational equality would lie in the contribution it makes to people's lives as free agents.

However, its plausibility is partly derived from its vagueness. Since Anderson remains rather abstract in her account of the harm- and wrong-making features of inegalitarian relations, much of the details of her argument for the value of relational equality remain to be spelt out. While intuitively appealing, it is unclear to which specific or precise values egalitarian relations are contributing and whether they are the only and exclusive means of promoting or securing these ends. Appealing to 'the social conditions of everyone's freedom' is explanatorily unsatisfying as it neither specifies which normatively valuable freedoms are promoted by egalitarian relations – as surely, not all (normatively unproblematic) unfreedoms are condemnable for relational egalitarians – nor accounts for the indispensable or unique role of egalitarian relations – as we can imagine these ends realized by means other than egalitarian relations – in securing these ends. Therefore, Anderson's proposal, although plausibly accounting for strong intuitions about relational inequalities, fails to make a convincing case for the explicit, positive value of relational equality on personal terms and for moral prescriptions that flow from it.

For Scheffler (2005), relational equality is similarly an attractive ideal because, as he writes “we believe that there is something valuable about human relationships that are, in certain crucial respects at least, unstructured by differences of rank, power, or status” (Scheffler, 2005, 17). As

Scheffler notes, his is a pluralistic understanding of equality. One that applies to a broad range of relationships, each of which comes with different prescriptions for what constitutes egalitarian relationships in that given context. For the paradigm relations of political society between citizens, he argues that living in a society of equals has great personal value. It is worth quoting his thorough and dense claim at length:

“[L]iving in a society of equals is good both intrinsically and instrumentally. When the relationships among a society’s members are structured by rigid hierarchical distinctions [...] the resulting patterns of deference and privilege exert a stifling effect on human freedom and inhibit the possibilities of human exchange. Because of the profound and formative influence of basic political institutions, moreover, patterns of deference and privilege that are politically entrenched spill over into personal relationships of all kinds. They distort people’s attitudes toward themselves, undermining the self-respect of some and encouraging an insidious sense of superiority in others. Furthermore, social hierarchies require stabilizing and sustaining myths, and the necessity of perpetuating and enforcing these myths discourages truthful relations among people and makes genuine self-understanding more difficult to achieve. In all of these ways inegalitarian societies compromise human flourishing; they limit personal freedom, corrupt human relationships, undermine self-respect and inhibit truthful living [whereas] an egalitarian society helps to promote the flourishing of its citizens.” (Scheffler, 2005, 19)

Scheffler paints an elaborate picture of the bads of social inequality and the good of enjoying egalitarian relations, by referring to the manifold effects that inegalitarian relations have on individuals’ human flourishing. It is clear from his description that egalitarian relations, against that, make an important contribution to people’s lives. Egalitarian relations promote human flourishing, they enable them to live freely and thus make the lives of these people go better. Like Anderson’s proposal above, Scheffler’s can therefore be counted among those offering an evaluative account of the personal value of relational equality. Moreover, Scheffler also combines this evaluative view with a normative claim. This deontic norm is what Scheffler calls the egalitarian deliberative constraint (henceforth, EDC), which both explains and justifies what egalitarian relationships are. Its chief requirement is that “the comparably important interests of each party should play a comparably significant role in influencing decisions made within the context of their relationship” (Scheffler 2015, 2). Hence, the apparent proximity between Anderson’s and Scheffler’s views.

Yet, just as with the former's proposal before, Scheffler's view is open to objections of a similar kind. Since Scheffler takes inequalitarian relations to affect people's lives in manifold ways and to bring about various effects, the notion of affected human flourishing is described problematically vague by the author. This is maybe not accidental though. As Litalien (2021) helpfully reconstructs this, Scheffler's view and emphasis on human flourishing runs into a dilemma: either he leaves the notion of human flourishing explicitly vague, running the risk of rendering a duty to promote flourishing meaningless as it cannot be known what specifically constitutes it (Litalien, 2021, 85). Or, Scheffler espouses a specific account of human flourishing and rejects other conceptions of the good, which in turn commits him and his relational approach to a comprehensive and perfectionist theory of equality that, as Tomlin (2014) argues, a plausible conception of relational egalitarianism would likely have reason to want to avoid (Tomlin, 2014, 170).

Both evaluative accounts of the value of relational equality then, have intuitive appeal but also come with certain drawbacks. The advantages of their theories lie in the fact that they make a compelling case for the plurality of detrimental effects that inequalitarian relations have on people's lives. They explain in a straightforward way why we ought to care about relational equality, insofar as realising this ideal makes people's lives better. Relational equality is justified on instrumental grounds because it promotes certain valuable ends, such as the social conditions of everyone's freedom and it is valuable as an intrinsic part of human flourishing by itself. The disadvantages of both theories, on the one hand, lie in the explanatorily insufficient way of explaining how these different dimensions of relational equality can be coherently subsumed under one theory. The remarks by Anderson and Scheffler leave their proposals indeterminate. On the other hand, they lie in the fact that they leave it underspecified to exactly which ends or goals egalitarian relations are contributing, which precise value they otherwise realise on non-instrumental terms, and why egalitarian relations are uniquely justified as indispensable means to promote these ends.

That said, despite the objections presented above, I remain sympathetic to these evaluative views about the value of egalitarian relations and the normative claims about requirements of relational equality provided by Anderson and Scheffler. I believe that their accounts correctly capture some of our crucial intuitions and considered judgments about what makes relational inequality morally objectionable and, in contrast, egalitarian relations valuable. However, a convincing theory of the value of egalitarian relations along the lines of these traditional relational egalitarian accounts needs to overcome the challenges of vagueness and underdetermination outlined in this section. In what follows, I present an alternative interpretation of Anderson's and Scheffler's understanding of the disvalue of inequalitarian relations, which conceptualises it as an impediment to human agency, and which, I will argue, can overcome these problems. This view will provide a better foundation for identifying the value of egalitarian social relations.

2.3 The harms and wrongs of relational inequalities as impediments to human agency

The analysis of the evaluative view on the question of what makes relational equality morally desirable in the previous section has shown that some of the most prominent and promising theories deliver attractive yet indeterminate and underspecified accounts. Neither Anderson's nor Scheffler's explications of the personal value of relational equality succeed on their own. In this section, I pick up the threads of these early relational egalitarian accounts and aim to show that their crucial elements are better explained by and accommodated in a theory of human agency.

Recall from the section before, that a convincing account that takes inspiration from those authors' evaluative views needs to show in a distinct and determinate way how and why egalitarian social relations derive their value. My proposal is that an account of human agency explains and helps meet both of these requirements. That is, I suggest reading Anderson and Scheffler's accounts of the wrong-making features of inequalitarian relations through an agency-based lens, to eventually gain a more precise perspective on the positive value that egalitarian relations have.

Anderson, as I have argued above, sees the moral problem in inequalitarian relations as lying in their adverse effects on securing the social conditions for everyone's freedom. This suggests that inequalitarian relations are bad (and wrong) because they make some *normatively valuable* freedoms of ours less secure. Scheffler suggests in a similar spirit that inequalitarian relations have a plurality of negative effects on our human flourishing, they *inter alia* affect our self-regarding attitudes, like one's self-respect, self-esteem, or self-worth, and thereby compromise some of our freedoms (see Litalien, 2021, 86f.). These broad proposals are, however, not satisfying. My claim now is that understanding these effects of inequalitarian relations as impediments to the exercise of human agency specifically (and not as freedom-reducing generally), is better suited to help us determine the precise locus of those relational bads and wrongs. Let me explain this proposal.

First, the notion of human agency that I am referring to here needs some explanation. For the purpose of this section, I assume, in line with the standard conception of action (cf. Schlosser, 2019, see also Ferrero, 2022), that agency can be defined as an individual's capacity for intentional action. To be an agent is to be able to perform intentional acts. Presumably, it is through such intentional acts that we, in some sense, freely devise and pursue projects and relationships in our lives. This is a fairly neutral description of agency that will suffice here. I request you to bracket any further questions about this idea for now. I shall have much more to say about substantive conceptions of agency in 3.4. and later on (in fact, the whole of Chapter 3 is dedicated to defending a specific normative view about the value of human agency).

With this in mind, we may reflect on why the focus on human agency is appropriate. A closer look at how the bads and wrongs of inequalitarian relations are typically treated, reveals, I believe, its inherent connection to specific concerns with exercises of individuals' agency. Consider, for example, some prime instances of oppression that, especially early, relational theorists were concerned with, the problems of relations of domination and marginalisation.

Domination has traditionally been understood in this literature along Neorepublican lines, as obtaining when three conditions are in place. A person “dominates or subjugates another, to the extent that (1) they have the capacity to interfere (2) on an arbitrary basis (3) in certain choices that the other is in a position to make” (Pettit, 1997, 52). The problem of domination then, as a relational problem, lies in some feature of the wrongful interference of a superior person with another, inferior person’s conduct. This can be a physical constraint or coercion, or the threat thereof, that is imposed on one agent by another (see *ibid.*, 17). Moreover, it is the social inequality that results from this, that makes this a problem of equality, not just one of unfreedom, for relational egalitarian theorists (see also Lovett, 2024). These asymmetries subordinate some individuals under others²⁵. Now, I believe we can frame this relational problem in terms of free or valuable exercises of agency: relations of domination are *bad* because they enable some to interfere with others’ capacities to exercise their agency, viz. they impede their capacities to deliberate and carry out their intentions in the world. Having one’s agency dominated by others in this sense, is subordination to others in a social hierarchy. This unequal constraint put on our interests in the (free) exercise of agency is then, I assume, what makes inegalitarian relations *wrong* on grounds of a comparative complaint.

Marginalisation likewise is a phenomenon of inegalitarian relations. As Young (1990) writes, this is one of the severest forms of oppression, where “[a] whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination” (Young, 1990, 18). The relational injustices that people living on the margins of society face, are, beyond any distributive concerns, as she further notes, that they are deprived of freedoms and rights that others have, “because [marginality] blocks the opportunity to exercise capacities in socially defined and recognized ways” (*ibid.*, 19). The proximity to the notion of free and effective human agency is evident. We can adequately understand the harm- and wrong-making

²⁵ For an understanding of domination as a relational problem of social inequality, see e.g. Kolodny (2019).

features of marginalisation in terms of agency deprivations: marginalized individuals are hindered in their capacities to pursue their projects and commitments in social settings. This is a problem of social inequality as marginalisation unfolds relative to other individuals' positions in society. We can even further imagine that some kinds of marginalisation, which, for example, work through stigmatisation prevent individuals from forming intentional plans for projects and relationships to pursue in the first place. Like in the case of domination before, marginalisation can thus be described as a comparative bad *and* wrong. It is bad because it impedes certain individuals from carrying out their intentions in the world. And it is wrong not least but also because this affects individuals in social settings unequally.

This, I suggest, translates to other relational inequalities as well. The bads of inequalities in status, authority, and esteem, can each be conceptualised as similar impediments to free and effective human agency. Their wrongness stems from the comparatively unequal social standing that is their result. Building on this interpretation, I want to claim that we can understand both Anderson and Scheffler's descriptions of the harm- and wrong-making features of inequalitarian relations as morally objectionable interferences with individuals' agency. Anderson's rather vague remarks on the social conditions of freedom and Scheffler's sweeping verdict that inequalitarian relations negatively affect human flourishing can be made sense of as concerns with (the conditions) for effective and morally valuable human agency. One lacks freedom when one is hindered in pursuing a goal by another agent and one's flourishing is impeded when others wrongfully interfere with our capacities to carry out intentional action. My proposal is thus similar to Litalien's (2021), namely that we can

“understand the different kinds of inequalitarian relations not as freedom-reducing, but rather as different mechanisms through which relational inequalities work to reduce, hinder, or even, in extreme cases, extinguish subordinate people's agency.” (Litalien, 2022, 88)

Yet, I believe we can beyond Litalien's general proposal and describe the relevant constraints on agency even more precisely. It is not the exercise of agency in general, that I believe is objectionably constrained by inequalitarian relations, but a specific kind of such agency. The relevant agential pursuits that are morally problematically interfered with, are arguably those that are inherently performed with others and which take place under pervasive and enduring social settings. It is the relationships and projects that we entertain with others, that are specifically affected by inequalitarian relations. Domination and exploitation only occur in society, stigmatisation works through social norms and expressive judgments, and the phenomenon of powerlessness is a comparative notion relative to others in a given social context. Or, put negatively, inequalitarian relations do not (necessarily, at least) impede my agency in collecting mushrooms in a forest.

This tracks well the relational and comparative character of the central moral problem at hand. Hence, I think that the precise locus of the bads and wrongs of inequalitarian relations can be located in the *social* dimension of the exercise of human agency and the problematic interferences with individuals' agency that they enable. Such interferences are evaluatively bad for individuals. And while interferences of any such kind are arguably (*pro tanto*) objectionable, we have reason to consider them specifically wrong because of their effects on this kind of human agency. In line with, particularly, Scheffler's view, this enables us to grasp why inequalitarian relations have both instrumental and non-instrumental disvalue. And by that, we can see how this evaluative view can lend itself to a comparative deontic claim as well. We have a complaint against being placed in inequalitarian relations with others, because their comparative constraints on our interests in effective human agency are wrongful. The moral disvalue of such social relations supports a norm to relate to others as equals.

Note, however, that the scope of my argument is limited. I do not have the space here to defend the general view and show that all relational inequalities can understood as impediments to human agency (although, I do tend to hold this view). I merely outline that the harm and wrong-making

features of some widely acknowledged relational inequalities, e.g. relations of domination and marginalisation, can be elegantly captured in this agency-based understanding. Beyond that, I argue that we have good reason to accept the further conjunction that, conversely, the (positive) value of egalitarian relations also has to do with the impact of this kind of social relations on individuals' capacities for exercising agency.

While staying true to the spirit of the original relational egalitarian theories, this gives us, I believe, a more determinate and more adequately specified target of the harms and wrongs of inequalitarian relations, than what we find in Anderson's and Scheffler's seminal accounts. Positively, I suggest that this also offers us a way to approach and conceptualise the value of egalitarian relations: just as inequalitarian relations are morally objectionable because they thwart some kind of human agency, egalitarian social relations, I suggest, derive their value from the contribution they make to individuals' valuable exercises of agency in pervasive social settings. This agency footing for thinking about egalitarian relations provides, I think, an attractive evaluative view, for defending the personal value of egalitarian relations, one that has both instrumental and non-instrumental components and one that has the necessary resources for a normative claim about their specific demands as well. It therefore serves as a solid foundation for the general view that I want to defend in the upcoming chapters on the moral value and justification of egalitarian relations.

Before we are in a position to do so though – and for this idea to take centre stage in such a normative argument – a more precise account of this only vaguely described notion of agency is required. Before, I had already alluded to the idea of comprehensive social goals and a distinct social dimension to human agency, or human agency when performed under pervasive social contexts, that is particularly relevant for explaining the (dis)value of (in)egalitarian social relations. Whether we can conceptually distinguish these social from other exercises of agency and why this is important, has yet to be clarified. To give such an account shall be the last task of this chapter.

2.4 Exercising agency: individual and social kinds of human action

Let me then start this final endeavour of this chapter with a more in-depth discussion of what has been labelled as the property of agency in contemporary philosophical debates. This advances the provisional understanding of agency that I have been operating with, in this and the previous chapter, by adding a substantive interpretation which, so I shall demonstrate, is overall plausible and which we have good reason to adopt.

In a fairly broad and general sense, an agent is an entity with the capacity to act, and the manifestation of this capacity we may call agency (Schlosser, 2019). Describing this further as an intentional capacity gives us the standard conception of agency, as developed in the field of philosophy of action. Now, for a more robust form, we may add that this capacity itself can be divided into two parts: on the one hand, the capacity to intentionally – in a normative sense, on one's own and for reasons that one recognises as their own – form a plan of the good life. And, on the other hand, the capacity to also follow through and realise said plans. Additionally, we may follow Christman & Anderson (2005) in assuming two central conditions for a general conception of agency: a degree of competence and authenticity – to exercise agency, an agent must (to some extent) have a hold of certain personal competencies to devise and execute plans in their lives and their decisions must (to some extent) be authentically their own (Christman & Anderson, 2005, 3).

Conceptually, the exercise of agency in this sense can be contrasted with similar moral notions such as control or the, arguably thicker, ideal of autonomy. It is notable to point out here though how the notion of agency differs from these. With regard to control, agency gives a more limited view of the capabilities that individuals need to possess. It specifies the capacity for intentional action as the central condition while being indifferent to the specific constraints on such actions. To be an agent, one does not have to be in full control of oneself or over one's external environment. Likewise, one's agential pursuits need not exhibit (all) features of autonomous action, such as responding to reasons in all and only the right ways and having a suitably defined range of choices

available. To qualify as such, these more demanding conditions for conducting actions are not entailed by the generic notion of agency. Rather, control and autonomy represent ‘excellent kinds’ (see Mele, 1995) of human agency.

That said, these ideas are often tied together, featuring prominently in or more senses in contemporary moral and political philosophy and discussions of moral, political or social agency. In this regard, Raz’s notion of being the author of one’s own life, having appropriate inner abilities, independence, and an adequate range of options, captures some of the crucial functions of agency (Raz, 1986, 372). Similarly, in Rawls (1971), the notion of deliberative rationality and the capacity to form, revise and execute a rational, consistent plan of life is described as central to human agency (Rawls, 1971, 407ff.). Moreover, this notion of agency plays a central role in Neorepublican political theory as a specific ideal of positive freedom (Pettit, 2001/2003), in certain theories of human rights as a degree of voluntariness and purposiveness that grounds those moral rights (see Gewirth, 1978/81), and of course in debates of Kantian-inspired philosophy on moral autonomy (see Reath, 2006) and respect (see Cholbi, 2020).

Arguably, the exercise of agency plays very different roles and fulfils different purposes in moral and political philosophy²⁶. Authors writing about it have very different things in mind when they refer to agency or the value its exercise has in different aspects of human life. Whether the concept is utilized in a descriptive or prescriptive fashion, philosophers tend to merge various analytically distinct features and conditions under one term, rendering the concept ambiguous at best. To make progress on this problematic feature of debates about human agency and following the insights from the previous section, I want to argue that we can make a meaningful conceptual distinction between, what I shall label, individual or minimal and social or expansive agency. This is a distinction that, I claim, we can reliably and robustly make, and which enables us to capture the

²⁶ Part of this linguistic vagueness may be owed to the fact that ‘agency’ as it is understood here is a philosophical *sui generis* term, which naturally makes it difficult to account for its semantics in everyday speech and natural languages.

nuances of human agency more precisely, while still allowing for various substantive interpretations in comprehensive normative accounts. Yet, that said, at this point of the argument, I will only postulate stipulative and general formulations of these two types of agency. The validity of the distinction shall be tested and proven throughout this and the next chapter's discussions.

As minimal agency, I shall denote the individual and 'private' exercise of agency. This encompasses one's capacities to deliberate, create, and derive orientation for pursuing a plan of the good life. We can describe this kind of agency as individual in the sense that it only refers to any agent's personal capacities for engaging in this activity and to the narrow circumstances any acting person needs to find themselves in making use of their capacities. Exercising such individual agency is minimal insofar as it only assumes a modicum of authenticity and competence. It does not require a full set of conditions necessary for autonomous action (see above). What it does include, however, are, on the one hand, some facts about one's internal situation, namely whether one is equipped with the mental and physical abilities to consider, plan, and realise actions. And on the other, it describes those features of one's circumstances that are, at a minimum, necessary or which need to be absent, in order to deliberate about and carry out one's actions. This then comprises things such as not starving, not being held at gunpoint or being otherwise coerced, having some, albeit not necessarily an optimal, range of options to pursue, and the like.

The exercise of agency in this sense is private because its agential pursuits can, theoretically at least, be realised in the absence of others. Even if one's projects for life often are implicitly thought of as taking place within collective contexts, the success of private exercises of agency remains agnostic about the influence from and impact on other human agents. For example, consider a person's aspirations to become a top-notch marathon runner. Even though one can only be a marathon runner in a world in which the social institution of marathon running exists, such a person's exercise of agency is private because it does not, in essence, require others for its success.

That goal, a person can achieve solely by themselves. In other words, such an exercise of agency is not inherently social.

Let us call the following conception, the *individual or minimal* definition of agency, which I believe can be endorsed by any substantive normative theory.

Individual or minimal agency: an agent exercises agency if a) they have sufficient personal competencies to intentionally devise a plan for their lives, for reasons they recognise (to some degree) as their own, and b) they have the capabilities and some minimally necessary external conditions to act on and execute the plans for their lives.

This definition should be uncontroversial in conceptual terms since it follows largely from the standard conception of agency. It captures the broader, general conception of human action that falls under the mantle of agency. Furthermore, as long as these conditions are sufficiently flexible (and no stronger perfectionist interpretation is prescribed), any theory of political morality will also acknowledge that *Individual or minimal agency* is to some degree valuable. Aspiring to be an agent seems to be something that is desirable for everyone, as anyone would favour being in a position to deliberately set ends for themselves and be able to follow through on them. Even when we lack proper choice situations, there is something good about the fact that we, actively, adopt some (even from a limited range of) ends and attempt to pursue them. And it is *prima facie* better when persons have more than less of these opportunities for exercising such individual agency.

Now, contrast this with agential pursuits that are deeply embedded in the social world of the individuals in question, those that revolve around comprehensive social goals. Think of people who are pursuing parenthood, aspiring to be a teacher, or getting elected as a member of parliament. These exercises of agency necessarily require interactions with other human beings, as they only gain meaning within collective environments. Without other people existing, those projects and relationships could not be pursued. Our intentions in such activities are often

somewhat shared with others²⁷. Be it, as in the *ad hoc* given list above, relations of family, occupation, or based on societal functions, these exercises of agency have an inherent social dimension, viz. they take place within single or multiple social structures or better, social contexts.

Social contexts, as I have defined them in Chapter 1, are ‘the one particularly relevant relationship or the sum of individual relationships that make up the comprehensive – persisting and pervasive – social relations between participants in a given situation’. Such contexts can moreover be described as enduring, often not easily entered or left, and typically difficult to mould (which is to say that entry and exit are costly, and change meets resistance). Characteristically, often when one pursues projects and relationships within these social contexts, the prospects of one’s exercise of agency are partly dependent on the responses, their attitudes and treatment, from others (I shall have more to say about the significance of this later in Chapter 3). To deliberate about which paths to pursue and subsequently realise one’s goals in such contexts requires adequate social circumstances. One can only be a teacher in a given context if one’s pursuit of this role is properly recognised by others, one can only be a parent (in the sense of pursuing a role) if the relationship that is pursued, is set up in ways that allow for it, and so forth. These are tokens of agential pursuits that I dub exercises of the type of social or expansive agency²⁸.

Notably, not all exercises of agency in pervasive social contexts have these features – there are private exercises of agency within these collective contexts as well – but I believe that typically our exercises of agency within collective contexts are of such nature. In any case, I want to maintain that we can robustly distinguish between exercises of individual and social agency. This is a conceptual distinction that enables us to make sense of the variety of phenomena that are usually

²⁷ The proposed is not equivalent to the idea of collective agency, which features frequently in the philosophical literature on social ontology (cf. Tuomela, 2013; Roth, 2004), but bears some similarities with it: as Chapman (2020) writes, “[r]ecognition of and responsiveness to the agency of others involved in a collective activity is the key distinction between shared intentions and ordinary individual intentions” (Chapman, 2020, 11).

²⁸ Related notions of such exercises of agency have also been discussed in the philosophical literature on well-being, where they go, for example, under the label of ‘activities for pursuing comprehensive goals (cf. Raz, 1986, 308) or ‘other-dependent’ activities (cf. Crisp, 1997, 508).

blended together under the umbrella term of agency within moral and political philosophy²⁹. So can we, for example, see that the Razian account of agency is primarily concerned with the conditions necessary for exercising one's individual or minimal agency, whereas Neorepublicans such as Pettit have first and foremost the conditions of one's social agency in mind when they discuss what it takes to be free and equal in society (see e.g. Schuppert, 2013).

Taking this into account, a conception built on this notion of the social dimension to the exercise of agency is captured in the following conception of *social or expansive* agency:

Social or expansive agency: an agent exercises social agency if a) they have sufficient personal competencies to intentionally devise a plan for their lives, for reasons they recognise (to some degree) as their own, b) they are able to plan and pursue their goals having some level of factual authority and social esteem, and c) they have sufficient (material) capabilities at their disposal to act on and execute their plans for their lives.

As we can see, this conception, retains the first part of the definition of individual agency, but adjusts its second part which is itself split into two clauses. Naturally, we can assume that the social exercise of agency encompasses the relevant parts of what is required for one's private exercise of agency. Some level of personal competencies and authenticity for forming beliefs about which goals to pursue, for example.

What is essentially added to that, in b) and c) are conditions for pursuing and realising one's agential pursuits under enduring social circumstances. To start with the latter, c) gives a more demanding account of the external circumstances needed. Beyond freedom from coercion, manipulation, and the like, it specifies a sufficient level of material means and capabilities for carrying out one's projects. To function within a social context requires several things, including being put into a position in which, to cite the familiar line by Adam Smith, one is equipped with the material means

²⁹ A similar-spirited distinction motivates the dual-level account of agency that has been proposed by (Claassen, 2017/2018).

to be able to ‘appear in public without shame’ (Smith, 1776/1976). Some level of material provision is assumed to be necessary for exercising one’s agency in pervasive social settings³⁰.

Besides this stronger interpretation of one’s external, material circumstances, clause b) seeks to make sense of what I have described as the central feature of the exercise of social agency, its dependence on the responses from others. It is expansive in the sense that it extends the success conditions of this type of agency to features inherent in the social realm. And it does so by accounting for it in terms of what has been typically referred to as *de facto* authority and social esteem. Let me explain both of these general notions in turn.

First, to possess *de facto* authority in general, is to be able to assert commands that are, generally, obeyed. In contrast to the normative notion of legitimate authority, which features frequently in debates in democratic theory, *de facto* authority is a non-normative notion. While the former tells us something about a relationship in which those subjected to an authority P have a moral obligation to obey that person P, the latter says in a descriptive sense that P’s commands are generally followed, often because some or many of those subjected believe that P’s commands have authority in the normative sense. This is to say that *de facto* authority requires certain attitudes from subjects towards the agent exercising it. And as such it is thus different from power, which operates in the realm of threats and offers alone and concerns an “agent’s ability to get others to act in ways that they desire even when the subject does not want to do what the agent wants him to do” (Christiano, 2024).

Similar, with only minor deviations, on Kolodny’s (2023) influential account, to say that any one person A has higher *de facto* over another B implies that A can command “a more significant range of actions” from B. This means that “directives are not presented as advice, which merely informs”

³⁰ This hints at likely distributive implications for securing people’s abilities to pursue their social agency, and thus to a larger, historically important question for relational egalitarianism (cf. Introduction), which I will not have space to engage with in detail here (but see e.g. Sen 2010).

B “of reasons that would have obtained even in the absence of the communication”. B then obeys and “performs the commanded action at least partly because it was commanded”. Yet, this authority is *de facto* “in the sense that the commands need not create, claim to create, or be believed to create reasons, let alone moral reasons, for compliance” (Kolodny, 2023, 92).

Thus, for me to exercise agency socially, is to say that I am in a position in which my voice is in some sense heard, my assertions are taken seriously and my directives are generally followed, *ceteris paribus*. If I in my position of, let’s say a teacher, am not being taken seriously and my voice is discounted within the social context in which this occupational role is relevant, then I fail in my effective exercise of social agency.

The case is likewise for the social esteem that my position attracts in a given collective context. In its common usage, to esteem, as Brennan & Pettit (2004) remind us in their book-length treatment of the subject, can either mean to estimate or to estimate positively. The relevant notion here is the former, estimate in the neutral sense, which can come in positive or negative form. Essentially, esteem is an evaluative, comparative, and directive attitude. It rates people in some dimension, its intensity depends on comparing the person with others, and it is given only in areas in which it is assumed that agents are generally capable of influencing their performance (Brennan & Pettit, 2004, 16). Esteem is often but not only sought for instrumental reasons, because “[t]o the extent that I am positively esteemed by others, my interactions with them are likely to run smoothly” and for evidentiary reasons because “[e]njoying esteem of others provides me with evidence [...] that I am living up to the ideals assumed in the background evaluations; if I share those ideals, as I normally will, then it should be welcome news that others think that I live up to them” (ibid., 26).

Such esteem is social, when its evaluation stems from others and when grounding traits for receiving it are a salient feature of social relations. That is, when the distinguishing characteristics are commonly known and taken to have social relevance. It is “the esteem that is at stake when one’s actions and traits are observed by, and induce evaluative attitudes in, others”, and operates

as a kind of “social currency that is silently transacted as individuals undertake actions and as observers observe” (Brennan, 2017, 58). Esteem based on certain aesthetic standards, for example, need not but can be of such nature. This depends on whether esteem in this dimension translates to how agents are generally socially recognised in a certain social relation.

Receiving a decent level of social esteem from others, in one’s social agency is part of what is beneficial for its successful exercise. When a person A enjoys such social esteem, compared to a person B who does not, only “they attract certain kinds of favourable responses from others, in some group to which they both belong, such as, among other things, respect, courtesy, and a willingness to serve interests” (Kolodny, 2023, 93). Yet, to attract a low level of social esteem, or not being thought worthy of such esteem, likely results in frictions with the relevant others of a social context and being thought badly by others also likely infringes on my level of self-esteem (see Blank & Szalai, 2020). This is to the detriment of effective social agency. For that reason, I want to argue that exercising agency in pervasive social contexts will be defined through some level of social esteem received in addition to some level of *de facto* authority ascribed by others.

This then yields two distinct conceptions of human agency. One is concerned with individuals exercising their agency in their private pursuits, describing the minimal conditions necessary for being an agent. And another that focuses on the social conditions necessary for successfully deliberating about and pursuing projects and relationships with others. Again, these are only very general formulations of the elements that I think are part of exercising agency individually and socially. To reiterate, the more detailed discussions in the chapters to follow shall present the distinct nature and joint value of these two types of agency more precisely. For now, let us at this point pause and look at how this connects to the insights from the previous sections of this chapter.

We may conjecture at this point that either of these conceptions, individual and social agency, could theoretically represent a valid candidate for the prudential value that we take egalitarian relations to secure, and thus eventually serve as a justification for the moral value of relational equality. That

is, the impact on agency in either conception could explain the positive contribution that authors such as Anderson and Scheffler think egalitarian relations make in human lives. It seems, however, clear that a conception of individual agency is too weak on closer inspection for establishing any meaningful requirements of social *equality*. For a social egalitarian interpretation of the value of agency, the relevant conception should be sensitive to the traditional concerns with social hierarchies. If not, it would turn out that, for example, Anderson's relational egalitarian account of the social conditions of everyone's freedom is more of a liberty-based than an egalitarian proposal. Valuing agency on egalitarian grounds certainly involves more than securing the minimal normative conditions cited above and is, of course, better captured in the conception of expansive agency. The latter's emphasis on the responses from others, and its connection to *de facto* authority and social esteem, is suitably sensitive to the issue of social rankings that constitute hierarchies and their impact on the exercise of human agency under pervasive social relations.

For those reasons, I believe that the latter conception better accounts for the substantive reasons that relational or social egalitarians have for endorsing the prudential value of agency. In particular, I want to argue that this conception of agency provides the missing details for where the argument in section 3.3. left us: it accounts in a conceptually adequate way for the target of Anderson's and Scheffler's proposals of the personal value of egalitarian social relations while allowing for a more systematic account of the ends that such relations promote or safeguard.

Adopting this understanding of social agency has important implications for our understanding of the concrete conditions under which we should think that egalitarian social relations obtain on our view. It provides us with the needed elements for a substantive account of egalitarian social relations that the discussion in Chapter 1 left us lacking. There, I defined the *equalisandum* in the conception of the nature of egalitarian relations in terms of equal social consideration. I argued there that we should treat this as an umbrella term for whichever social form is appropriate for equal weight or concern to take on in a substantive theory, a theory that explains the valuable

features of individuals when considered as socially active agents. We are now in a position to describe the relevant adequate and equal (recall its non-comparative as well as comparative components) social consideration more precisely. Since the account given in this section explains the success of these social exercises of agency as inherently linked to the responses of others, conveying a certain level of factual authority and social esteem to agents can fill this function. Thus, with this conception of social agency in mind, to appropriately socially consider another agent is to treat (and regard) their social exercises of agency with due *de facto* authority and social esteem (or esteem-worthiness³¹).

To maintain egalitarian social relations between individuals as social agents – as persons who exercise their agency socially with others and against the backdrop of entrenched social relations – is for them to treat (and regard) each other's social agential pursuits with adequate and roughly equal *de facto* authority and social esteem. This is how we should interpret the equal and adequate social consideration that is required in social equals' mutual treatment (and regard).

With this, we have arrived at a concrete theory of the kind of human agency that is relevantly sensitive to the quality of social relations under which it is exercised. This understanding suggests that successful exercises of social agency are somewhat connected to the social consideration received. This provides us, at last, with an attractive evaluative view for determining the value of egalitarian social relations. One that goes beyond Anderson's and Scheffler's rather vague accounts of the personal value of relational equality, but which still retains important elements of their views and which appropriately captures, I believe, their main motivation for stressing the positive contributions that such social relations make to individuals' lives.

That being said, it still requires further normative argument to account for the specific value that this proposed social exercise of agency has. While I have already tentatively suggested throughout

³¹ See Zuehl (2023, section 2) on esteem-worthiness and actually being socially esteemed.

this chapter that there is likely some personal value realised in being an effective agent, we have yet to see where precisely its value resides and how it specifically connects to egalitarian social relations – why egalitarian relations are uniquely suited to promote our interests in exercising agency of that kind, so that they are justifiably taken to be of special moral salience and relevance. To this task, I shall turn next in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3.

EGALITARIAN RELATIONS AND THE VALUE IN EXERCISING AGENCY

This chapter takes up the lead from the previous chapter's analyses, which yielded the view that Anderson's (1999) and Scheffler's (2005/2015) accounts rightfully locate the moral desirability of egalitarian social relations in the contribution they make to how well people's lives go. Going beyond their seminal accounts, I have proposed that this personal value of egalitarian relations is best thought of residing in their effects on human agency. Not just any exercises of agency, however, turned out to be relevant here, but specifically, those that are inherently connected to responses from others and which necessarily occur within social contexts. Distinguishing such social from individual kinds of agency provided us with a plausible rationale for seeing where the moral concern with egalitarian social relations lies. That said, an exact account of this value in exercising agency and its normative link to egalitarian social relations has not been adequately addressed and discussed yet. To further explain and defend these claims, is the subject of the chapter at hand.

The central argument is established over three sections: I begin in section 3.2. by analysing the specific value of exercising agency in general and propose a refined account that recognises both instrumental and non-instrumental prudential value in the exercise of agency. This understanding builds on Raz's (1986) insights into the value of personal autonomy through the lens of Suits's (1978) and Nguyen's (2020) works on layered human agency. In section 3.2, I apply this account to the realm of social agency and show that it is properly sensitive to the issues of commanding *de facto* authority and receiving social esteem which are inherent features of social projects and relationships. Finally, in section 3.3, I explain the specific constitutive relationship that holds between, on the one hand, exercising agency socially, and on the other, enjoying egalitarian social

relations. The constitutive thesis that is defended in this section coherently explains, on grounds of exercising social agency, why we have reasons to value and secure egalitarian relations for many social contexts. This in turn prepares the ground for the subsequent chapter's argument on our claims to stand in such social relations of equality.

A note before I proceed. Although the focus of our endeavour lies on the above-proclaimed social dimension of exercising agency, it is nevertheless instructive to begin this analysis with an examination of the personal value of individual exercises of agency and then continue from there. This follows the thought that only when we are equipped with an overall account of the contribution that the exercise agency, both individual and social, makes to individual well-being, can we later, in Chapter 4, fully grasp the moral relevance of securing egalitarian social relations based on that value.

3.1 The general value of exercising agency

So, what, if anything, makes the exercise of agency, particularly valuable? To recall from the chapter before, what we are after is an account of the alleged prudential value of agency – one that answers the question of why and in what ways the exercise of agency has personal, well-being value for human beings. In a trivial sense, agency intuitively clearly has such value to human beings. Nozick's (1974) well-known thought experiment, the *Experience Machine*, shows that a life without agency is seriously flawed. Nozick asks us to imagine the following scenario:

“Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life's experiences?” (Nozick, 1974, 42)

While Nozick primarily takes this thought experiment to demonstrate that we value more than mere experiences, and thus why certain (hedonist) theories of well-being are implausible, it also

illustrates why human agency has some obvious value for human beings. In Nozick's hypothetical example, our lives go badly. Everything we think that we accomplish is in fact an illusion. While we, in the floating tank, are hardwired to have our desires fulfilled – imagine our projects include learning a valuable skill or aiming at achieving something truly great, such as contributing to finding the cure for a disease – no skill is in fact honed and no such achievement reached. I have earlier suggested broadly understanding the exercise of agency as intentional actions, carried out to design and pursue one's plans for the good life. Yet here, none of our projects are realised. Things are merely happening to us.

The exercise of agency thus plausibly has some prudential worth. That said, we need to know more about what specifically the value of agency is. Is its exercise valuable solely because it is positively linked to the realisation of other ends in our life, or does it have some objective value in and of itself, or does its value lie in something else entirely? This allows for at least three possible options: the exercise of agency can be prudentially valuable to individuals because of its beneficial consequences for rendering possible other well-being goods, or because it is good even irrespectively of or primarily in addition to any such potentially good implications, or due to a combination of both. In other words, the exercise of agency can be instrumentally valuable, non-instrumentally or intrinsically³² good, or both. Let me examine the prospects of either of those possibilities in turn.

The contribution that the exercise of agency, as an instrument, makes to how well our lives go, is hinted at in the example above. Being an agent allows us to choose and pursue projects and relationships. It does so by bringing us closer to our individually set ends, in a particularly valuable way, i.e.: by having us deliberate about them, enabling us to acquire skills and achieve those goals in our lives. In contrast to a world in which things are merely happening to us, even if those are

³² For the purpose of this chapter's argument, I assume that no fine-grained distinction between non-instrumental and intrinsic value is required and shall use those terms interchangeably (but, see Scanlon, 1998; or Moore's isolation test; Moore, 1903).

desired, or when those somehow desired ends are set by someone else than ourselves, agency contributes to our well-being through the special quality of how we choose and pursue our values. Human agency is instrumentally good because it enables us to reach morally and prudentially valuable ends (see, e.g. Hurka & Tasioulas, 2006).

This notion should be both intuitive and uncontroversial. The important point, however, is that postulating instrumental goodness alone is not sufficient to ascribe any fundamental value to the exercise of agency. After all, many things are instrumentally valuable to our well-being and agency might not even be of particular salience or weight. Other instrumentally valuable ends could simply turn out to be more important – because more fundamental to our well-being – to secure. To see why the exercise of agency confers a special value to egalitarian relations, as we intend to find out, we first have to grasp why we indeed have fundamental interests in being agents. Thus, why the exercise of human agency has also value in and of itself.

That said, I believe there are good reasons to consider agency having such a dimension of non-instrumental value. In fact, I shall argue, that the exercise of agency has both instrumental and non-instrumental value and is, therefore, able to ground significant fundamental interests. To do so, I attempt to establish an argument in favour of that view, which is inspired by a particular Suitsian (or, Ngyuen) reading of Raz's theory of agency and the ideal of personal autonomy. Suits' (1978) and, following him, Ngyuen (2020) have developed theories of the prudential value of agency that, I think, inform and supplement well Raz's (1986) general approach to agency, reasons, and the good.

Now, Raz's (1986) account of personal autonomy, which is akin to the idea of agency that I have outlined so far (see Hassoun, 2014, 104), is a complex view. Raz famously argues that an "autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life [...] it is the vision of people controlling to some degree, their own destiny, fashioning it through successive decisions throughout their lives" (Raz, 1986, p. 369). On this account, being an author, enjoying autonomy and exercising agency,

requires certain conditions such as specific mental abilities, an adequate range of options, and a level of independence. These are requirements stemming from a substantive conception of what I have formally labelled (excellent) exercises of individual agency in the previous chapter. Beyond these, however, there are several other interesting aspects that Raz engages with when he analyses the value of this kind of agency. Thus, we find in his discussion the central notion of agential unity, which is given through commitments and self-creation. Raz's description is worth quoting here at length:

“Our life comprises the pursuit of various goals, and that means that it is sensitive to our past. Having embraced certain goals and commitments we create new ways of succeeding and new ways of failing. In embracing goals and commitments, in coming to care about one thing or another, one progressively gives shape to one's life, determines what would count as a successful life and what would be a failure. One creates values, generates, through one's developing commitments and pursuits, reasons which transcend the reasons one had for undertaking one's commitments and pursuits. In that way a person's life is (in part) of his own making. It is a normative creation, a creation of new values and reasons. It is the way our past forms the reasons which apply to us at present.” (ibid., 387)

There are several elements in this quote unpack. First and foremost, Raz holds the familiar view that realising the value of exercising agency requires the capacity to reason, create, and pursue a plan of the good life based on people's own reasons and values. As Christman (2017) puts it, Raz is “attempting to capture what have been called *authenticity conditions* for autonomy, namely the circumstances where a person's values, motives, and desires are truly her own” (Christman 2017, 8). Dworkin's (2011) discussion of this notion of authenticity is also instructive here. For Dworkin, to be an authentic agent, one needs to find a valuable style of living, “a way of being that you find suited to your situation, not one drawn mindlessly from convention or the expectations or demands of others” (Dworkin, 2011, 210). Thus authentic agents will strive for independence and resist domination from their social circumstances, to make sure that, “so far as decisions are to be made about the best use to which a person's life should be put, these must be made by the person whose life it is” (ibid., 212).

It is only then and through this self-directedness that persons can properly identify with their choices and pursuits. This, as Raz stresses, further requires certain external conditions, such as the absence of coercion and manipulation. Persons need to be able to freely commit to their projects and relationships and embrace and identify with their commitments. Such self-directed exercises of agency are on Raz's view particularly valuable "since people's well-being depends to a considerable extent on the projects and relationships around which their lives revolve" and "frustrating their successful pursuit undermines people's well-being" (Raz, 1986, 376).

This line of reasoning gives substance to familiar intuitions about the value of agency. Intuitions such as those that arguably feature in Mill's (1869) writings, when he maintains, as Powers & Faden (2019) explain "that being self-directed, or living one's life from the inside according to one's own inclinations and values, under suitably favourable social conditions, is itself an important constituent of human well-being" (Powers & Faden, 2019, 39, 121; see also Anderson, 1991). It also mirrors part of Gewirth's transcendental (or, in the author's terms, 'necessary dialectical') argument for the value of agency, who asserts that as an agent "I must have freedom and well-being in order to pursue by my action any of the purposes I want and intend to pursue" (Gewirth, 1981, 128). In essence, claiming that if any agent denies their rights to these conditions for effective human agency, they contradict themselves (see *ibid.*, 129), which thus justifies fundamental interests in the exercise of agency on grounds of our prudential needs for self-directedly pursuing our specific individually chosen purposes.

Raz, however, goes beyond this in asserting that the value (also) lies in the agential pursuit of normative self-creation. In exercising agency, a person is "gradually developing a conception of oneself, and their actions are sensitive to the past" (Raz, 1986, 385). For as in committing to one's projects and relationships, upon which any person's well-being depends, one gives unity to life. We do so by identifying with the values that we create, based on reasons stemming from the

commitments of our past. A successful agent makes one's self-identifying commitments cohere well with another, in a constant process of personal self-creation.

This shows a special kind of normative consideration, which according to Raz, is at play here, namely the validity of normative 'action reasons' (cf. *ibid.*, 145f.). As Crisp (1997) explains, such reasons are "reasons for agents themselves to perform the action in question" (Crisp, 1997, 507). They can be contrasted with outcome or goal-oriented reasons which derive their value from considerations merely about the result of some actions. Against those, we sometimes have a reason to directly care about that individuals are exercising their agency, a reason the value of which is independent of the outcome achieved. In other words, we would lose some value when some desirable ends for a person are reached, if they were not able to pursue that goal as an agent themselves. The agential performance is in and of itself of value in our normative self-creation.

This is how Raz, in rather abstract strokes, illustrates the special value that the ideal of personal autonomy has as a particularly valuable kind of exercising agency. While this explains in almost poetic ways why the exercise of agency is valuable, Raz's account arguably remains ambiguous about whether its moral value resides on instrumental and/or intrinsic grounds. The lines referenced above offer some reasons for thinking that it has both dimensions, yet a more thorough explanation would arguably do great service. At this point, I thus want to introduce an argument from the works of Suits (1978), that was recently refined by Nguyen (2020), and which, I believe, can clarify what Raz is specifically alluding to in these final passages of his magnum opus, *The Morality of Freedom*.

A bit of background information is needed to properly embed this argument. The idea of human agency plays a central role in both Suits and Nguyen's theories of value. Both authors are specifically interested in the *aesthetic* value of games. They locate the distinct value of games, or game-play, in the ways they interact with our human agency. In Suits' classic statement, games represent 'the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (Suits, 1978, 41). In game-

play, we readily accept arbitrary (and inefficient) constraints on pursuing certain pre-defined goals. This is a feature of playing games that largely distinguishes it from other types of human action. As Nguyen puts this, following Suits' seminal account, games specify "particular modes of agency for the player to adopt. This is what makes games a distinctive art form" (Nguyen, 2019, 423). From that, it follows for both philosophers that games are by far not a mere waste of one's time but offer a genuine aesthetic experience of the world, unlike what any other art form can offer.

Now, the details of their accounts of game-play, their views on lusory ends and the means we take up for achieving them, are original and worth engaging with in their own right, but those need not concern us here. What is of interest to us, however, for our endeavour into examining the non-instrumental value of agency, are Suits and Nguyen's analyses of how our capacities for exercising agency can be expanded and increased, and in which sense this adds particular value to our lives.

Some more (at first glance, rather obscure) terminology is helpful here to clarify their position. In interpreting Nguyen's account, Camp (2023) argues that the central idea we find there is, that games 'sculpt' or 'crystallise' "agential modes into stable, tangible forms that focus attention and skills in precise, well-defined ways, which we can then deploy elsewhere, in less scripted contexts". And that, besides aesthetically rewarding, a person's interaction with "a game's interlocking structure of goals, abilities, and obstacles affords access to game-extrinsic, real-life goods like exercise and social connection" (Camp, 2023, 449). Engaging in game-play thus has value *inter alia* because it facilitates realising other well-being goods outside of the game environment.

Yet crucially, being an agent in such game-play does not merely instrumentally realise other intrinsically valuable goods. A person engaged in what Nguyen labels, 'striving play' – a form of play in which we do not care much about winning but genuinely strive to engage in the struggle of games for game extrinsic or intrinsic reasons – acquires agential skills that are valuable in their own right. Those skills are indirectly beneficial to the pursuits of, what is sometimes called, our 'ulterior interests' (cf. Feinberg, 1987), our long-term plans or final ends. As such striving players, we adopt

‘disposable ends’, genuine and non-instrumental but temporary ends, in games by reverting the usual means-end motivation. We do not seek to take up whichever means are rational to efficiently realise a certain valuable goal, we rather aim for a certain defined goal to take up specific means to strive for it. Akin to the familiar paradox of hedonism (cf. Sidgwick, 1874), the ultimate ends that we pursue through games are ‘self-effacing’. Rather than pursuing them directly, we have to take on other, temporary goals to realise this value (Nguyen, 2019, 441). In other words, “[we] must (try to) win just in order to play” (ibid., 449).

Those disposable ends are, so Nguyen, also not damaging to our enduring and integrated practical identities, but instead quite familiar to us. We quite usually pursue some instrumental goals, such as taking up specific hobbies, for the sake of some ulterior ends, such as meeting people and getting together with others. Somewhat similar, in games, we take up some non-instrumental ‘local’ ends, in order to bring about a final end – to experience the struggle of pursuing an (arbitrary, temporary) goal under particular constraints. The general idea is that we gain something by experiencing such different agential configurations that well-designed game environments provide. The value of game-play here lies not in what this exercise of agency can instrumentally achieve but simply in the experience of exercising one’s agency in a specific context, with particular goals and means, itself. In that sense, being exposed to different agential modes of engaging with the world, makes our lives richer and enables us to acquire skills that we can deploy in other contexts. And it is on those grounds that, for these authors, the exercise of agency in and of itself has non-instrumental prudential value (see Nguyen, 2019, 437, 450).

This Suitsian-inspired account of game-play has certain implications for how we, following Nguyen, will see our overall capacities for human agency. On this view, a person’s overall agency is much more fluid and modular than traditionally recognised in accounts of practical reason and their understanding of well-integrated, practically unified agents. This view postulates a ‘layered’ or ‘nested’ agency that exists within practical identities. There is “purposeful and managed agential

disunity” (ibid., 445) instead on Nguyen’s view: various and numerous agential settings which we enter and engage with, that, in fact, increase a person’s capacities for exercising agency *tout court*.

How should we understand all this? Nguyen argues that we develop robust, stable selves over time by engaging in activities that provide specific agential modes. By doing so, we acquire a ‘library’ of such modular agential modes and repertoires of interactions with others in certain ways (Nguyen, 2020, 86f.). This thereby shifts the understanding of the unity of selfhood that is gradually developed:

“[the] locus of agency would then reside as much in one’s choices about which contexts to enter and which modes to cultivate as in one’s enduring, reflectively endorsed commitments or one’s moment-to-moment choices. And we would achieve selfhood not necessarily by subsuming our lives under extended teleological structures, but rather by integrating our repertoires for engagement into coherent characters [...]” (Camp, 2023, 456)

On this account, the coherent unity of an agent’s practical identity is achieved through this process of appropriating particular agential ways of engaging with the world, by pursuing particular goals in so-and-so constrained ways. We can see how this connects back to the Razian formal notion of developing a self-directed conception of oneself over time and is able to give content to it – it is the manifold agential modes, in the relationships and projects, that we find ourselves in, or develop and take up for ourselves, that make our lives go well. When we commit ourselves to these projects and relationships, we commit to pursuing certain goals and ends by taking up specifically defined or enabled means. As teachers, we take up temporary ends such as becoming good at evaluating students’ writing skills, for the purpose of experiencing, well, the role of *teaching*. As a parent, we might adopt, among others, the goal of keeping fit, for the sake of being able to provide for our kids. And so forth. Over time, our various agential experiences consolidate in a coherent conception of ourselves.

Our general well-being depends indeed, as Raz reminds us, on the projects and relationships around which our lives revolve. Yet, it is not only that those are instrumental to our well-being, but that

our experiences of the ways we approach them, our agential approaches, are in itself a source of well-being. By committing to projects and relationships, we are exposed to different agential configurations for pursuing goals by taking up particular means which equip us with different skills. In deliberating about which contexts to enter, and which projects and relationships to pursue, we gradually develop a stable conception of ourselves that is built on a ‘library’ of agential modes.

This also allows us to demarcate the exact non-instrumental value of exercising agency in general from that of autonomous action specifically. While the latter requires, for Raz especially, a decent range of options, hence meaningful choice, the value in the exercise of agency can be realised under less demanding conditions. Even in choosing to inhabit roles or agential configurations that were shaped by others, or which were historically generated through various social processes, can we realise this non-instrumental value. There is a more modest but relevant value in exercising agency in general, a value that we should acknowledge to exist even under less-than-ideal choice situations. While already hinted at in Raz’s writings, the Suitsian-inspired account of the non-instrumental value of agential experience in pre-shaped (game) contexts, established by Nguyen, brings that forth more clearly.

To bring those strands of theorising properly together then, we can hold that: a) being an agent is one sense instrumentally valuable to our well-being, as it enables us to hone specific skills and reach achievements that allow us to acquire goods that are fundamentally of value to our well-being. And b) the exercise of agency has also some non-instrumental prudential value, which we find in the self-directed, coherent conception of oneself that it enables. A value that is gained in and through the different contexts of projects and relationships to which we commit ourselves as purposeful agents. This offers, I believe, an attractive view for explaining the value of human agency in the lives of individuals. It accounts for what I assume are widespread intuitions that agency is valuable to persons as an instrument for gaining things essential to our well-being and for the maybe more

elusive but not alien notion that the exercise of agency in and of itself has some, non-instrumental, prudential, value.

That said, I conjecture that this account will meet resistance. One important objection that I anticipate goes as follows: even if we accept that the exercise of agency can have some non-instrumental value, along the lines argued above, is this always true? Is the exercise of agency really valuable for individuals who are, for whatever reason, not in a position to respond to reasons in the right ways? Or, similarly, are morally objectionable actions chosen as an exercise of agency better than if they would have simply otherwise occurred or were committed in non-agential ways? Those are complex questions which require detailed answers. However, there are a few things that can be said against such an argument, some of which I have already hinted at earlier in this chapter.

First, it follows from the account that I have established so far, that some minimal conditions, personal competencies and a degree of authenticity are presupposed by any successful exercise of agency. Responding to reasons to some degree correctly is thus implied for any human action. Furthermore, even if the non-instrumental value of agency seems to be diminished in some cases, such acts arguably still retain some value, namely in their instrumental dimension. The exercise of agency can still be, all things considered, valuable in these cases when they allow one to acquire and hone a skill that they then can deploy in other settings and contexts in which the non-instrumental aspect of agency is more likely expected to be realisable. The instrumentally valuable part of agency rescues the account from this objection to some degree. Moreover, I am generally inclined to think that there is some value even in those agential pursuits where ends are chosen badly or in objectionable ways – if only because they might still help remedy elements of the conception of oneself later on. These exercises of agency might be based on wrong reasons, but they could still be instructive in a future stage of our ongoing process of normative self-creation. Since one's manifold and layered agency, as Nguyen describes it, is instrumental in achieving practical unity and a coherent identity over time.

Beyond that, I want to maintain the relevance of normative considerations about action reasons, as described before – that there is value in agential performance that is somewhat independent of its relationship to rationality and autonomous choice. Even agential pursuits that do not respond optimally to reasons (or only do so along the minimal conditions referenced above) can still have some non-instrumental value for individuals on my view. Thus, I think there are good reasons to bite the bullet of the objection and accept that, since the exercise of agency is generally valuable, non-autonomous and even morally objectionable exercises may have some worth. Either on some, albeit limited, non-instrumental terms or because they instrumentally contribute to the overall value of agency in individuals' lives over time. On those grounds, we can, I believe, dismiss concerns based on such an objection.

With all this in mind, how does this account compare with the requirements outlined in Chapter 2? Can it meet the conditions for explaining the disvalue of inequalitarian social relations that we find in the seminal accounts of Anderson and Scheffler and which I have described as impediments to human agency? To recall, I argued in the previous chapter, that, while we have on exegetical grounds good reasons to think that both authors are correct in pointing out that inequalitarian social relations frustrate (some of) our prudential well-being interests, their analyses of how specifically they do so are underdetermined. The exercise of social agency, so I have claimed, is better suited to fill in the details of those fundamental interests in human flourishing.

I believe that the account of the value of human agency developed throughout this chapter so far does capture the core normative issues that are involved in the bads and potential wrongs of inequalitarian relations, as I have described them specifically in section 2.3 of the previous chapter. Since agency has both instrumental and non-instrumental prudential value on this view, we can conjecture that social relations which deprive individuals of opportunities to exercise their agency do make their lives get worse. So would certain social relations of domination or marginalisation, for example, when these hinder individuals in their pursuit of their set projects or prohibit them

from forming relationships with others. This is of disservice to one's gradual development of a conception of oneself, to our agential experiences, and negates a self-directed commitment to one's goals around which most of our lives revolve. On the flip side, being involved in relationships that support our capacities to exercise agency, enables one to form a coherent sense of identity and self, which we can see in itself is a genuine source of well-being. In this sense, the account appears to cohere well with the *desiderata* established in the analyses of Chapter 2.

That said, the way the argument has been laid out in this section, is both fairly abstract and general. It takes cues from the history of moral philosophy and the philosophy of games in sketching a theory of the non-instrumental value of agency in general and *in abstracto* from any specific concerns with how agency features in specifically enduring and pervasive social relations. While I believe that this general theory has merit, in order to have a more apt explanation of the non-instrumental value of agency in such social conditions, we nevertheless need to apply this account to these specific circumstances next and examine its validity there.

3.2 Realising the value of exercising agency socially

Up until now, I have offered an argument for the general prudential value of human agency. As I have argued before, only approaches that account for such personal value in non-instrumental terms have the theoretical resources necessary for plausibly explaining the special value of egalitarian social relations. The relationship between human agency and social relations is, however, a complex one. Earlier I suggested distinguishing between individual or minimal and social or expansive human agency and subsequently claimed that egalitarian social relations are specifically and desirably linked to the latter. For that reason, we need to take a closer look at this point at the conditions and extent of such non-instrumental value in exercises of social or expansive agency.

Recall the following definition of social agency that I have offered at the end of Chapter 2:

Social or expansive agency: an agent exercises social agency if a) they have sufficient personal competencies to intentionally devise a plan for their lives, for reasons they recognise (to some degree) as their own, b) they are able to plan and pursue their goals having some level of factual authority and social esteem, and c) they have sufficient (material) capabilities at their disposal to act on and execute their plans for their lives.

In the previous section, I examined the non-instrumental value of what is mainly captured in clause a) of this conception. Leaving c) to the side, as I have explained before, we can now turn to the aspects of b) to see how the hitherto established argument applies.

I have claimed that the non-instrumental, prudential value of agency lies in the self-directed, coherent and stable conception of ourselves that its exercise allows us to adopt over time through the pursuits of different projects and relationships to which we commit ourselves as agents. Commitment to such projects and relationships also allows us to acquire skills, which we can deploy in other contexts. Inhabiting those agential modes is valuable not just because of its instrumental worth in achieving some other fundamental goals but because it matters in its own right. With that in mind, and assuming that there is a relevant social dimension to human agency – that we can meaningfully distinguish exercises of individual agency from those under inherent social circumstances – I now want to argue that realising its prudential value there is sensitive to enjoying a certain level of social consideration. This becomes salient when we consider our commitments to projects and relationships in enduring or pervasive social contexts. Let me unpack this claim bit by bit.

When we exercise agency socially, that is, with others' responses in certain social contexts in mind, we typically do so by committing to projects and relationships that exist against the backdrop of entrenched and already moulded social relations. The nature of those projects and relationships can be of various character. Their function might be rendered possible because of the existence of a social relation, or they can itself be the product of such relations (see the Introduction). When we deliberate and pursue our so-set goals, we often cannot but fall back on the options provided by historically already set-up social contexts. In other words, the form of many of our agential

commitments is pre-shaped by social contexts. Such contexts give and fix meaning to various socially conducted activities. They are what makes some socially pursued comprehensive goal a social fact (cf. Gilbert, 1989).

Just as in well-defined game environments, we might say, pursuing a comprehensive goal there is somewhat socially defined and constrained. Professional projects like aspiring to be a teacher or nurse, can naturally only be pursued through the venues offered by society. Moreso, what it precisely means to take on and commit to a certain role of a teacher is defined by social, and in this case for example, legal relations. We cannot take up any means which we may deem suited or rationale to strive for these goals, rather, to successfully realise them, we have to fall back on some predefined and socially provided options instead. These are, what I have argued in Chapter 2, defining features of typical instances of social agency.

Again, it is important to stress that these do not encompass all types of exercising human agency with others. Some commitments of ours are safely shielded from the impact of other agents. Committing to be a long-distance runner is, for example, sometimes (and reasonably so) pursued with others. But this and other similar projects are private exercises of agency which do not count among the exercise of social agency as I have defined it earlier. The relevant instances of exercising social agency, on the other hand, have those features in common and are for those reasons sensitive to others' responses. Such agential pursuits of ours are social in a double sense: they are so because they occur within venues provided by pre-shaped social contexts and because the prospects of exercising them well, depend on the evaluation from other agents, thus our social standing among them.

It is in this regard, that I have described successful social agents as enjoying both a level of *de facto* authority among others and as receiving some admiration from those to whom they are socially related. Individuals are effective social agents when they can make their voice heard and when they

can expect to attract social esteem from others in their agential pursuits. So much I have stipulated for social agency at the end of the previous chapter.

To be more precise at this point, I argue that the prospects of exercising social agency well are directly related to the social consideration that individuals are treated (and regarded) with, especially to inequalities between them – which is typically expressed by a social ranking of agents of some sort and manner. The value of any paradigmatic instance of social agency, as donning the mantle of a public servant, for example, has this characteristic of having its success conditions connected to an agent's received social consideration. It is as such, that I want to claim that realising the non-instrumental value of exercising social agency is sensitive to the levels of *de facto* authority and esteem that an agent enjoys. Now, to defend this claim, I will first engage with the question of how this value of social agency is specifically linked to levels of *de facto* authority and social esteem before I shall show in section 3.3. why successful exercises of such agency are especially sensitive to inequalities and insufficiencies of these kinds of treatment and regard.

So, why do we have particular interests in enjoying some positive level of *de facto* authority as social agents; how is having one's voice be heard related to the desired self-directed development of a conception of ourselves? I invite you to imagine committing to a project with others or to a socially salient relationship without being able to command some adequate level of authority. As for the example above, committing to be a public servant, imagine that others do not feel compelled to listen or even consider what we, as bearers of such a role, have to say. Imagine further that our deliberately chosen societal position is generally negatively evaluated and individuals occupying such a role are generally less taken seriously. How would we be able to see much value in adopting this role if others do not, in some way, adequately socially recognise our exercise of such social agency? If the prudential value of human agency lies in the fact that it enables us to self-directedly develop a coherent, stable conception of ourselves and that taking up such positions allows us to acquire skills and overall agential modes that we can deploy in other settings, then such imagined

scenarios as these actively hinder us in doing so. They seem to impede our human flourishing because they render our exercise of social agency void.

On similar grounds, I want to argue, that we have relevant interests in receiving some positive social esteem for our agential pursuits. Realising the value of social agency implies that we can reasonably expect that inhabiting a specific agential position would usually attract some positive regard from others. This claim, however, I expect will meet stronger resistance. After all, positive appraisal or esteem is typically earned or awarded, and not simply voluntarily given without proper basis (although, cf. Brennan & Pettit, 2004). Even if we could freely esteem others' agential pursuits, one may wonder why individuals are in some sense entitled to a degree of social esteem and further why this is necessary for securing the value of social agency. Here, it is relevant to clarify the kind and quantity of social esteem that social agents plausibly have interests in first.

When we imagine ourselves exercising our agency socially, by deliberately choosing and pursuing a certain project, we can think of doing this successfully without receiving positive appraisal from others. A public servant may regret that others do not think highly of their chosen role but still gain some value from occupying it. At the very least, it may be instrumentally worth committing to it. Nevertheless, I believe that there is a sense in which some kind of esteem is relevant for the success of our social agential pursuits. This becomes clearer, I believe, when we consider agential pursuits that are negatively esteemed *sans* special rationale. Albeit we take attributing positive appraisal to rightfully require having a proper justificatory base, receiving negative social esteem without any reason is detrimental to the exercise of human agency. Again, let us imagine a scenario in which someone's exercise of social agency is met with negative appraisal or neglect without this evaluative attitude being, properly, grounded. Or when a social agent receives such a treatment even though the basing traits for negative appraisal are absent and merely (deliberatively or not) falsely attributed. It is plausible to say, I believe, that in scenarios like these, a person's well-being is diminished because their exercise of human agency is impeded.

Some helpful illumination and support for this claim comes from a recent paper by Ross (2022), where he argues a length that a “level playing field with respect to earning esteem” is required (Ross, 2022, 815). Social equality, according to Ross, “presupposes a default attitude of indifference about whether any particular person possesses certain characteristics deserving of heightened or lowered esteem” (ibid., 815). This does not mean,

“indifference in the sense of not caring, but rather in the stricter etymological sense of not making a distinction. This indifference is a *default* because it is what we should assume until we have personalised evidence that disrupts our indifference. The idea is simple: prior to someone distinguishing themselves in one way or another, we should not believe them to be more or less deserving of esteem than anybody else is.” (ibid., 816)

On Ross’s account, this explains why both positive and negative demographic profiling is deleterious: these tools violate a requirement of ascribing a *prima facie* positively neutral level of esteem. We can see how this relates to the issue of exercising one’s agency socially. Esteem in its social form, as an evaluation of individuals along certain dimensions that are (contextually) socially salient, is relevant because whether we socially recognise or deny one as esteem-worthy has implications for the success of people’s agential pursuits. If our commitments to projects and relationships in social contexts are met with anything but a default attitude of indifference to earning esteem, then the value in exercising human agency is likely to be diminished. Individuals who do not qualify, for whatever reason provided by their social environment, as the entities that can attract esteem, that can socially distinguish themselves, cannot gain the same value in their activities as other agents.

Yet, even beyond that, social esteem when given only to some but not others, has other implications for the scope of individuals’ agency as well. For instance, some social esteem that we receive in one social context, which spills over into another, impacts our and others’ agential capacities. This does not concern negative esteem alone. Positive esteem, for example, based on one’s professional performance, that is then capitalized on in the context of political society unduly affects one’s and others’ overall capacities of agency. Think of sportspersons- or entrepreneurs-

turned-politicians who can make use of their superior social capital from some such activities in pursuing entirely different aims in another context. This will necessarily affect the prospects of others' commitments there as well. They are likely to fare worse due to those others who carry such high but inappropriate social esteem. A situation that is only worsened when opportunities for gaining social esteem are generally scarce and only few can reasonably be taken to possess the traits gaining it. Falling between the cracks and failing to attract such esteem is likely to attract negative judgment that impedes one's capacities to exercise social agency equally well (cf. Porro, 2021).

This seems to suggest two points. Not only are proper exercises of social agency indeed inherently connected to the responses from others in the relevant social contexts – as I have argued in Chapter 2 – but, without some adequate or decent level of factual authority and social esteem, a person's agential pursuits are unlikely to secure much of this prudential value. Particularly, the prospect of gaining any non-instrumental value from exercising agency socially is then plausibly diminished.

That said, nothing of the above implies that these inequalities between and inadequacies of people's social esteem and *de facto* authority need to be treated the same, as similarly weighty and important for gaining this value. It may very well be the case that in some contexts or relations, receiving some amount of regard from others is less important for realising the prudential value of exercising agency than being in a position to have one's voice properly heard and respected. Intuitively, unequal or insufficient factual authority seems in many cases more relevant for one's social standing, and also morally more troublesome, than the social esteem received. With this in mind, I merely maintain, as in Chapter 2, that one's social consideration has, in essence, two components, both of which are important for enjoying the value of social exercises of agency. Yet, the significance of these elements might nevertheless vary by context and example (not least because the dimension of merit might also play a different role in inequalities of social esteem compared to those of *de facto* authority. More on this later in Chapters 4 and 5).

At this point, one might nevertheless want to resist this argument because it remains overly abstract. The notion of social agency and how it has specific value to us will still seem elusive. Capturing valuable exercises of social agency in more practical terms is helpful here. Recall from before that I followed the Suitsian/Nguyen understanding of a layered conception of agency. I proposed to think that in the exercise of agency, we adopt stable, tangible agential configurations. Those come with adopting ends under certain constraints and taking up specific means for meeting them. There is value in exercising these agential modes in and of itself, and because we acquire skills that we can deploy in various contexts. As the examples of social agency in this chapter have hinted at and as I have suggested earlier in Chapter 1, a natural way to understand this is by looking at the particular social roles that individuals occupy in social contexts. These are, so I want to argue, expressions of the crystallized modes of agency that Nguyen (2020) is alluding to, which explain the nature and value of social agency more clearly.

I have earlier explained how we can think of such roles as offering venues for attracting esteem, expressing identities and carrying status. We can put this into terms closer to the issues discussed in this section. For that, a look at recent works in role-ethics is instructive³³. There we find the idea that roles allow us to extend or expand our agential capacities by providing us with new styles of agency:

“In assuming a role, we take on a form of agency that other people have shaped and which is passed on to us within social institutions. Different roles enable us to experience the varied facets of human agency, and their social configurations. The kind of activity required of us, in occupying a role, may be temporary if role-occupancy is temporary. Exposure to new roles exposes us to new forms of agency. If we have multiple roles, our autonomy may be enriched and enlarged.” (Bunning, 2023, 303)

We can thus see how social roles fulfil a multiplicity of functions. Crucially, inhabiting roles enables us to pursue our interests in human agency in various ways. Some roles are functionally desirable, i.e. when they allow us to acquire, deploy, and hone skills, while others have value because they

³³ See Barber & Cordell (2023) for a comprehensive overview on this literature.

enable us to engage with the world in a particular agential configuration. Very much in the spirit of this chapter and the Razian (1986) notion of personal autonomy, social roles are taken to enrich our capacities for leading a self-directed life and to develop a coherent conception of ourselves over time. Thus, I believe that we can see such social roles as the *loci* of agency that Nguyen, following Suits, is describing. Social roles come with goals, particular constraints for how to achieve them, and usually a package of ascribed role-responsibilities and role-privileges. In other words, inhabiting a social role well requires an agent to successfully pursue certain goals within an environment specified by the context in which the social role exists.

As I have suggested, how one is socially considered in a certain context has a direct impact on the chances that this exercise of agency instantiates value. This we can make sense of in terms of our adopted social roles. If I am being treated as irrelevant or held in low regard in my function as a role-agent within a shared context, none or less of this type of value is realised (cf. also Hershovitz, 2011). To gain any value from occupying social roles does presuppose receiving a certain level of positive regard and being seen as a somewhat authoritative agent in our joint social relation. On those grounds, I claim that the social role account shows why social consideration is important for carrying out valuable exercises of social agency. This gives us a better grasp of the nature of the phenomenon at hand, going forward.

Deliberating about which roles to inhabit in various social contexts is a prime example of the exercise of social agency. Occupying roles allows us to acquire skills and being exposed to a variety of roles is instrumental in developing a coherent conception of ourselves. But assuming a social role has also value in its capacities for allowing us to experience an agential configuration, one that need not be invented or defined by us, but which could just be a feature of the contexts we find ourselves in. This once more points to the specific view on the value in exercising agency that I have defended in this chapter. Human agency generally has non-instrumental prudential value, even when our intentional actions are not (fully) autonomous. It suffices that we adopt roles through

some deliberation based on reasons that we accept as relevant to us so that we can gain value in these social agential pursuits. Even when those reasons are given by others and when only a few, meaningfully different of these role venues are open to us. When we choose to adopt multiple ones, decide to maintain or relinquish them, for reasons that we so minimally recognise as our own, we still add to the unity of our practical identities. Committing to social roles is an act of normative self-creation, as Raz describes it.

And for these reasons, the value of social roles does not solely lie in any extrinsic values they help to realise, viz. whether they enable us to form other meaningful relationships or to realise certain achievements in a social context. Beyond all that, taking up social roles has non-instrumental value for us as socially active individuals, because our lives are going better when we are able to experience different modes and venues for achieving goals. It helps us form a coherent conception of ourselves. Gaining this value from inhabiting a role well, depends, however, on the social consideration with which we are treated and regarded. That is, the value of these activities is only fully realised when role-occupants are appropriately considered as authoritative over, and esteem-worthy in, their pursuits. In that sense, considering exercises of social agency through the lens of social roles provides, I conclude, an informative account for understanding how the value of exercising human agency in pervasive social relations is rendered possible.

In demonstrating the non-instrumental value of exercising agency individually and socially, and showing that the latter is sensitive to the social consideration received, I already heavily implied that effective social agency is specifically linked to social relations of a certain quality. Yet the exact nature of that relationship has not been laid out clearly. At this stage of the argument, this link can be made explicit.

3.3 The constitutive thesis about social agency and egalitarian relations

In the last step of this chapter's argument, I attempt to show how the successful and valuable exercise of, what I labelled, social agency is linked to a demand for egalitarian social relations. To be specific, I seek to explain this link by defending a constitutive thesis about the relationship between social agency and egalitarian relations, which says:

Constitutive thesis. Egalitarian social relations *nurture* social agency. They constitute (a significant) part of what is required to gain the *full value* of exercising agency socially. Being treated (and regarded) with adequate and roughly equal social consideration is (a significant) part of what exercising social agency effectively *in general* presupposes.

In saying that the nature of the relationship between exercising social agency in a given context well and having egalitarian relations with others in that context is not causal but constitutive, a particular explanation is required. This explanation needs to account for the relations between the features, not the history, that make up the relevant property (see Ylikoski, 2013). In this case, the property of being a valuable social agent, having the effective capacities for exercising agency socially well, needs to be explicated in terms of the characteristic of egalitarian social relations that hold between individuals.

The view that I am putting forward implies that having egalitarian relations with others simply is a large part of what it is for anyone to exercise their agency socially well. This means, that generally speaking, such social relations are one of the success conditions for securing value in exercises of social agency. By that, we go beyond the former section's argument showing that securing the value in social agency is dependent on some social consideration given to individuals. Rather, the claim now is specifically that mutual treatment (and regard) of equal and adequate social consideration is generally conducive to realising its full value.

In the second chapter of this thesis, we eventually arrived at a conception of egalitarian social relations that is based on a two-way, non-moralized view that I had argued represents its most plausible interpretation. I defined this as,

Egalitarian social relations. A person X is in an egalitarian social relation with another person Y if, and only if, X treats (and sometimes regards) Y's social expression of their agency (or, for short, Y's social role) with adequate and equal social consideration, and *vice versa*.

In Chapter 3, mutual treatment (and in some cases, regard) with decent and approximately equal levels of *de facto* authority and social esteem, emerged as the central features of our substantive conception of egalitarian social relatedness. Recall that such relations, on my account, thus have two central components, a non-comparative and a comparative one: on the one hand, individuals need to have an adequate amount of both *de facto* authority and social esteem (where the threshold of adequacy is determined by the relevant social context), and, on the other hand, it requires that individuals are treated with roughly equal amounts of authority and esteem, where deviations from strict equality above the threshold of adequacy are only permissible on grounds of special justification.

Applying the constitutive thesis, this then yields the following claim: being treated (and regarded) with an adequate and roughly equal amount of *de facto* authority and social esteem realises the success and value in social exercises of agency. Only if one is being treated (and regarded) as an equal, will they gain the value of social agency. Or, negatively, when social hierarchies and inegalitarian social relations exist, individuals' agential pursuits are impeded, their agency is ineffective, and no (or significantly less) value is realised.

Is that plausible? For reflecting on this thesis, let us consider the following hypothetical scenario,

Community council I.

Community council I. In a remote community, whose members are A, D, J and T, these regularly meet for council meetings. Within the community, A has (freely) adopted the role of an artist, D the one of a doctor, J pursues the role of a judge, and T has the community teacher role. Each role-occupant is adequately regarded and treated by others, their voice is equally heard in meetings and their participation is well-esteemed.

I would argue that *Community council I* represents a scenario of a social context in which those who are participating or are otherwise involved and integrated, enjoy egalitarian social relations between

them. Not only is everyone in their role appropriately treated, but each role is also equally well regarded. It is a microcosm in which the social egalitarian ideal reigns supreme.

Now, what does the fact that egalitarian relations obtain between the member of *Community council I*, tell us about their exercises of social agency; about their projects and relationships to which they are committed in this pervasive social setting (let us further stipulate that its remoteness renders leaving the community difficult or costly). If we assume that each role-occupant is satisfied with the role they have – that one could freely choose, enter and exit roles within this shared setting – then I think that we can reasonably hold that this scenario shows that egalitarian social relations are indeed constitutive features of successful and valuable pursuits of their exercise of social agency. Each and everyone's social roles provide valuable venues for exercising agency in this social context. Having others express affirmation and recognise us as equals nurtures our agential pursuits and the value we gain from them.

Consider what would follow in the absence of such relations, or, worse, if one is exposed to the opposite, as in *Community council II*.

Community council II. Same context as before, but now each role-occupant is differently regarded and treated by others. A is thought to be skilful but a slacker, D to be generally lazy in their profession, J to be always fair-minded, and T is generally well-thought-of. Accordingly, their voices carry different weight in community meetings. In these, J receives superior attention over anyone else, T's voice is heard and taken seriously, whereas both A's and D's contributions usually get discarded.

Arguably the members of *community council II*, are socially ranked and a typical kind of social hierarchy on grounds of one's social role exists: the judge commands superior *de facto* authority and social esteem, the teacher has adequate social standing, while the artist may be disesteemed but his authority sufficiently respected and the doctor on both dimensions ranked subpar. The social relations between them are inequalitarian because some are comparatively set higher than others, some receive insufficient social consideration, or because both features are prevalent.

For the argument's sake, let us assume that these differences in the ranking are not in any case 'deserved'³⁴, but the product of, let's say prejudice about some of the traits of persons occupying those roles or prejudices about those roles themselves. Are these individuals effective social agents? Moreover, are their social roles providing them with valuable venues for exercising social agency? I would argue that they are not. The inequalities and insufficiencies in social consideration attributed to those individuals impede this. Moreover, I believe that this shows that when one's social role is thought to be irrelevant for socially salient actions, e.g. making community decisions, or when one's role is generally negatively esteemed, one simply cannot exercise one's agency properly or expect to gain value from it.

I have been arguing throughout this chapter that the prudential value of exercising agency lies both in the self-directed development of a stable and coherent conception of oneself, through one's commitment to projects and relationships, and in the skills that are thereby acquired which can be deployed in other contexts of individuals' lives. And that in pervasive social settings, one's commitments are sensitive to the social responses and the social consideration of others. Yet, in the case of *Community council II*, some members cannot enjoy the *full* value of agency through committing to their social roles. Those whose levels of *de facto* authority and social esteem are insufficiently low and comparatively less than others' *sans* special justification (A and D) are hindered in their effective exercise of agency³⁵. Being treated with such unequal and inadequate social consideration impedes one's interest in exercising agency for the purpose of normative self-creation and for giving unity to our practical identities.

³⁴ That is, superior or inferior positions are neither merited nor were some people's claims to egalitarian relations forfeited - issues that I will discuss later in Chapter 4 and 5.

³⁵ What about J, the judge, who enjoys superior levels of both authority and esteem? Is their superior social position hindering their exercise of social agency? I believe a reasonable case for this can be made, too. Receiving unearned high regard and factual authority might render one's pursuit of projects and relationships inauthentic, more a matter of illusion than real achievement. In such cases, inequalitarian relations could indeed be harmful to valuable and effective social agency.

Both persons A and D fare on comparative and non-comparative terms worse than others, something that is expressed in their low(er) social standing. Yet, we may very well think that there are some relevant differences between those two as well, which stem from the particular instance of unequal social consideration they receive. Whereas the doctor receives lower social esteem (but has adequate factual authority), the artist's voice is dismissed in communal decision-making, although they are held in high regard because of their skill. Arguably, lacking factual authority, as in the case of A, is intuitively more troublesome than receiving low esteem, as in the case of D. This finds some support in our view on the value of egalitarian relations and from the point of individuals' prospects of exercising valuable social agency. Although the doctor may be shunned by others in their social life, she likely still retains much of her standing as a respected agent and her main role-dependent activities are appropriately recognised. While for the artist, on the other hand, esteem might be particularly relevant for the success of his agential pursuits (admiration for one's works of art may well be sought after for its consequences as well as its own sake), the lack of factual authority is still problematic. Having one's voice not carrying any weight is detrimental to realising specifically the non-instrumental value of exercising agency. After all, what would we gain in these pursuits for developing our practical identities when we cannot assert ourselves as agents among others?

We can think of such impediments to agency to take one of two forms: either, in a direct manner, that role-dependent goals cannot be properly pursued in an environment where others treat and regard one's role as inadequate and worth less than others. If our plans and pursuits of social projects and relationships are constantly looked down on and our demands are discarded as irrelevant compared to others, then we are not in an adequate position to lead a self-directed life of normative self-creation in the first place. Or, in an indirect manner, insofar as individuals who are subjected to such unequal and inadequate social consideration incur additional and special costs when they attempt to pursue their social agency fully. Costs, which others who are ranked above

them do not face. To realise the full value of exercising agency socially, those so affected would need to spend additional resources to assure themselves that their roles are, in fact, and despite the inadequate social responses from others, worthwhile agential pursuits and a stable source of one's practical identity. These are costs that are typically not trivial or easy to stem, especially when the social reality of one's role is not easily malleable, and it is difficult to exit and change a social role. Such costs that are caused and maintained by inequalitarian social relations should strike us as unfair and generally unjustified, for that fact. It is not reasonable to ask others to bear these additional costs, just to be in a position to gain any or the same value from their agential pursuits as others.

In either of those scenarios, there are regrettable outcomes. Either one cannot effectively acquire agential skills and gain the value from gradually developing a coherent conception of oneself, based on reasons derived from successful agential pursuits of the past. Or, because under such circumstances, one has to invest much more than others to realise some of the value that these exercises of social agency would otherwise provide. In such cases, people's lives go worse, both comparatively and non-comparatively speaking, because their interest in valuable exercises of agency is frustrated and therefore, their overall well-being is diminished.

Thus, I believe, we can see that some type of social equality is indeed a precondition for individuals to meaningfully exercise their agency in a given social context. Without egalitarian relations obtaining between them, occupying social roles, and committing to projects and relationships, loses some or most of its value for those participating in a given social context. Rather, such social relations are central to developing and maintaining integrated practical identities, which we expect to result from the exercise of agency. They maintain the conditions necessary to gain value from our social agential pursuits. This underscores the constitutive relationship between egalitarian social relations and the exercise of social agency.

That being said, however, I anticipate that one might still object to this argument for the constitutive thesis. After all, it seems that all that the above entails, is that within social contexts,

some level of social consideration is *locally* needed for individuals to make use of and gain value from their exercises of agency. Such a requirement, even if it strikes us as convincing, would not, so the objection, travel to a demand for egalitarian social relations, *strictly speaking*, on a general level though. Even social roles that operate in wider societal relations would only establish the need for some level of social consideration within some delimited area. The hitherto established line of reasoning essentially only yields a piecemeal argument for establishing some minimal social equality. In other words, the argument faces an objection from the scope of egalitarian social relations.

While this anticipated objection is compelling at first glance, I believe that its verdict can nevertheless be rejected. For one thing, note that social contexts as I have treated and utilized this notion as a conceptual tool throughout the thesis are, by definition, manifold and their number is potentially open-ended. They include and range from the aforementioned archetypes of individual, close personal relationships, including familial relations, and professional relations, to society-wide relations of political society (or beyond). They can be legally or otherwise formally defined or be established based on informal rules as in systems of social norms. It is therefore reasonable to assume that any provisionally established taxonomy likely misses one or many of the relevant social contexts. This could be because some of them are only loosely defined, or hard to get a grasp on without adequate empirical foundation, or also because they have not yet been ‘identified’.

What I am alluding to here, is the following: the more familiar contenders for relevant social context usually (already) have some level of social salience. We know, or rather, it is common and public knowledge, that some contexts, such as professional relations, exist and are important venues for exercising agency and pursuing comprehensive goals. Yet, there may very well exist other contexts which are either unbeknownst to us or have yet to become such places to discharge one’s agency. Maybe, because the overall configuration of the social world changes (think of novel contexts, including virtual and transnational venues, for social and political activism that were unknown less than a decade before).

Furthermore, the diversity and manifoldness of social contexts in which individuals discharge their agency renders it difficult to have a clear-cut view of when to think that deviations from egalitarian relations could be harmless or ineffective from the point of individuals' overall interests in exercising agency. Quite the contrary, I would argue, we should reasonably assume that only egalitarian social relations, as I have defined them earlier, are constitutive of effective social agency unless shown otherwise. We should thus assume that both, a sufficiently high level of *de facto* authority and social esteem, and roughly equal amounts of them, are overall necessary for effective and valuable exercises of social agency. Epistemological uncertainty and pragmatic necessity give us, I think, weighty reasons to reject the idea of a piecemeal approach.

From this it follows, I want to argue, that a certain kind of social relations is *generally* presupposed by the successful exercise of many instances of human agency in society. In order to realise the prudential value of the exercise of social agency under pervasive social settings specifically, installing a certain ideal of social equality, in general, is required. For those reasons, the constitutive thesis is vindicated. There is, I conclude, indeed a robust relationship between good and valuable exercise of social agency and having egalitarian relations between members of society. This leads us to the verdict that the (non-instrumental) value of exercising (social) agency confers moral desirability onto egalitarian social relations – we have reason to value egalitarian social relations on the grounds of their contribution to the well-being of individuals in society. A contribution that we can find in their beneficial role for our capacities to exercise agency socially.

This insight concludes this discussion of the value of egalitarian social relations. Thereby, it also completes the moral argument that I have started devising in Chapter 2 and subsequently fully defended here in Chapter 3. Based on this moral account, we may conjecture that individuals presumptively have valid claims to such kind of social equality, to be able to enjoy the full value of exercising agency. Now, whether we have those claims, how we should interpret and respond to them, will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4.

RESPONDING TO THE VALUE OF EGALITARIAN RELATIONS

If egalitarian social relations derive their value from the contribution they make to our well-being through the effective exercise of social agency that they facilitate, that is, if they enable us to gain the full non-instrumental value in self-directedly developing a coherent conception of ourselves through the projects and relationships to which we commit ourselves in pervasive social settings, then do we have stringent claims to social relations of such quality? Do our, presumably significant, interests in exercising social agency support moral considerations for securing egalitarian relations for everyone? The chapter at hand engages with these questions and seeks to establish when our prudential interests in enjoying social agency give rise to moral reasons which support claims to being placed in specifically egalitarian social relations. Together with the account of the nature of egalitarian social relations presented in Chapter 1 and the view of their prudential value defended in the previous Chapter 3, this yields a conception of weighty albeit not absolute claims to an egalitarian standing in (at least some) social relations. This continues the central normative argument on egalitarian social relations in this thesis and is the first of three chapters that are dedicated to an analysis of the moral justification of such relations.

The main argument of this chapter unfolds over the course of four sections: in section 4.1, I explain how our fundamental interests in exercising agency socially ground comparative moral claims to egalitarian social relations. I do so by considering alternative grounding strategies first before eventually arguing that accounting for these claims in terms of normative reasons has the most merit for meeting the central egalitarian challenge of establishing such claims. The sought-after are *pro tanto* claims that I shall argue, are based on egalitarian moral reasons of either of two types. Section 4.2 introduces the first set of reasons for promoting egalitarian social relations, reflecting considerations for increasing agents' capacities for successful social action in close, personal

relationships. These are agent-neutral, outcome reasons for expanding the intensity and extent of egalitarian social relatedness. Section 4.3 then presents another set of reasons for honouring one's equal standing as an agent in wider, societal relations. These are agent-relative, deontological reasons of equal respect for an agent's socially ascribed status. Based on this, in section 4.4, I lay out the general account of egalitarian claims that is derived from these sets of moral reasons and discuss the implications and limitations that this *pro tanto* view on claims to an egalitarian social standing has.

4.1 From prudential interests to moral reasons and egalitarian claims

Up until now, the endeavour into the evaluation of the positive, normative dimension of enjoying egalitarian social relations has taken a distinctively prudential direction. I have examined these relations in regard to their impact on individuals' well-being and argued that the value of relations of such quality lies in them nurturing our capacities for exercising agency socially. The latter we can describe as prudential interests. We have 'a kind of a stake', to use Feinberg's (1987) phrase, in enjoying social agency. This is, moreover, a fundamental well-being interest (cf. Thomson, 2005) as the exercise of social agency is, so I have argued, a non-instrumentally valuable end.

Now, this account gives us a rough picture of the presumed overall desirability of egalitarian relations and the role that they might, could or should play in practical discourse. Yet, what remains to be seen, is how these interests entail and ground claims to enjoy such social relations of equality – why advancing these relations on moral grounds is required or prescribed. Moreso, and specifically for the *desideratum* of seeing the project of *positive* social egalitarianism (see the Introduction) completed, it needs to be explained why we have reason to secure such relations for everyone *equally*; why individuals are specifically equally entitled to (opportunities for) the successful exercise of social agency. In other words, it needs to be shown how we can move from specifying prudential interests to grounding a conception of egalitarian moral claims. This is, to defend a

normative claim about such relations based on the evaluative view that was established over the course of the two prior chapters.

Philosophers have traditionally thought very differently about the relationship between morality, well-being, and self-interest. Prudence and self-interest are often treated interchangeably. How well our lives go depends on this view on how well our prudential interests are served, and this is simply identified with how well we are able to look out for our own self-interest. Not much in my argument hinges on the details of this distinction but I shall rely on such an understanding. Whether well-being is morally significant, however, and how exactly morality relates to our prudential interests is more controversial (see Griffin, 1986, especially Ch. 8). As I have construed the case for egalitarian social relations, there seems to be a *prima facie* valid connection between one's interests in exercising social agency, egalitarian relations that facilitate those exercises, and one's prospective moral claims to such opportunities. After all, if agential pursuits are among a person's important ends, then "[t]hey are normally goals others can help him reach, by providing the right environment, the right conditions" (Raz, 1986, 306). It seems that this suggests that moral considerations are, in some way, tied to prudential ones. Hence the well-being secured by egalitarian social relations is morally significant and our moral claims are, at least partly, justified because they are grounded in certain prudential interests.

One, explicitly direct way for defending such a view can be found in the aforementioned argument by Gewirth (1978) (cf. Chapter 3), which is of interest to us if only because it likewise focuses on moral claims grounded in interests in exercising agency. In his work, Gewirth argues that, since an agent regards as necessary "the conditions for the generic features of his successful action, he logically must also hold that he has rights to these generic features, and he implicitly makes a corresponding right-claim". The considerations that justify those claims "are not moral but rather prudential: they refer to the agent's own freedom and well-being as required for his pursuits of his own purposes, whatever they may be" (Gewirth 1978, 71). By that, he subsequently establishes that

all agents are entitled to these conditions *qua* agents, claiming that, as prospective agents pursuing our purposes, we must logically “accept the generalization that all prospective agents who have purposes they want to fulfil have the rights of freedom and well-being” (Gewirth 1978, 112). This yields on his account a specific conception of human rights to the conditions necessary for successful exercises of agency, which is derived from, what Gewirth calls, a *Principle of Generic Consistency*. Gewirth, so it seems, moves directly from prudential to moral interests, from claims based on well-being interests to moral right-claims on grounds of a logical principle (cf. Bauhn, 2024). If correct, Gewirth successfully bridges prudential and moral interests in a simple, unifying theory.

Gewirth’s work has attracted considerable attention and praise (cf. e.g. Adams, 1980; Claassen & Düwell, 2013; Narveson, 1979). Yet even benevolent reviewers criticise Gewirth’s rather abrupt move from prudential interests to moral rights. As Feldman (1983), for example, objects

“there is a large gap between claims about what is good (even necessarily good) and claims about what people ought to do [...] Gewirth seems to be saying that every agent is prepared to move from an axiological claim about the goodness of his freedom to a normative claim about how others ought to behave with respect to it.” (Feldman, 1983, 480)

Gewirth’s direct approach proves to be a controversial argument for justifying moral demands. Not only are we left wondering what exactly we have reason to act on towards others, but also, and crucially for this chapter’s argument, it remains obscure whether such an approach to grounding moral interests does, in fact, succeed in specifying substantively egalitarian demands. Equality features as a formal and universal basic requirement in Gewirth’s theory rather than having a central normative place. This shows, I believe, that establishing moral claims in such a way skips some relevant argumentative steps. I thus take it that a plausible view for grounding claims to egalitarian social relations likewise should not move from prudential interests to moral claims (on grounds like logical consistency) *simpliciter*.

A more promising approach is, I believe, to make a *distinctive* normative claim, one that is, I suggest, explicitly grounded in *moral* reasons. Accounting for claims in terms of normative reasons provides, so I shall argue, an attractive unit of normative analysis (see also Moles & Parr, 2019) and a more precise way for stating the argument for the grounds of our claims to egalitarian social relations. Yet, such a strategy does also not come without challenges. The remainder of this section introduces the relevant terms and concepts, shows the central problem to be overcome, and gives a formal approximation of the claims and reasons that are required to establish such a view. The subsequent sections then introduce the substantive moral reasons that support the account.

To begin with, I take moral reasons to be a sub-species of practical, normative reasons for action. Under the latter type generally fall “considerations that guide or justify our actions” (Alvarez & Way, 2024). Or, in Scanlon’s canonical phrase, a reason to act is a consideration that counts “in favour of someone’s acting in a certain way (Scanlon, 1998, 17). As such, reasons for actions differ from other explanatory or motivational reasons (such as reasons for belief).

Furthermore, normative reasons can be of varying strength. In Raz’s (1999) classification, such reasons can be conclusive, if there are no overriding considerations; absolute, if there are no considerations that could ever override them; or *prima facie*, if they are neither conclusive nor absolute (Raz, 1999, 27). Reasons thus differ in how strongly they recommend what we ought to do. In Darwall’s (2017) terms, we can similarly distinguish between reasons to act, all things considered, and *pro tanto*, or other things being equal, reasons for actions (Darwall, 2017, 2). Both *prima facie* and *pro tanto* reasons are of lesser normative force. The former can disappear in the face of new, conclusive or absolute reasons coming to light, the latter can be outweighed or excluded by other (*pro tanto*) considerations in our practical deliberations. These qualities will play a relevant role later, as we shall see that our claims to egalitarian social relations are plausibly grounded in reasons of *pro tanto* nature.

Practical, moral normative reasons in particular generate a specific ‘ought’. While prudential reasons specify a prudential ought, e.g. you should carry an umbrella if the forecast predicts rain, moral reasons specify a distinct moral ought, e.g. you should not steal an umbrella from your colleagues whether or not it is likely to start raining. The difference is simply that the moral ought in question is derived from distinct moral considerations.

Moreover, various ontological accounts of what these moral reasons are can be found in the scholarly literature. Intending to stay largely agnostic about this question, I assume, with Darwall (2017), that moral reasons are best understood as “considerations that generate *pro tanto* moral obligations in the fully deontic sense; they are *pro tanto* right- and wrong-making considerations.” (Darwall, 2017, 8). I believe that this statement captures well the function that we want to attribute to moral reasoning. Moral reasons, in this sense, specify *pro tanto* ‘oughts’ and thus determine the deontic status of actions, which makes them similar to Rossian *prima facie* duties (cf. Ross, 1930).

That said, the considerations of the sort that are involved in moral reasons require further explanation. One way to account for them is by saying that they are reasons which are distinctively related to the moral point of view. This of course only shifts the question to another level. After all, we might demand to know then what the moral point of view is. And further, for the project of this chapter, why we ought to, from this point, advance and secure egalitarian social relations. There are a few angles from which we can approach this subject though.

First, the hallmark of morality is its fundamentally impartial perspective. Moral considerations do not privilege anyone’s particular standpoint. Hence, the often-cited *prima facie* acknowledged conflict between prudential and moral interests, between well-being reasons based on self-interest and impartial moral reasons (a conflict that, as I have tried to show, Gewirth’s argument attempts to circumvent or resolve by deriving the latter directly from the former). In the history of modern (Western) moral philosophy, this impartial moral point of view has been spelt out in different terms. We are familiar with ideas such as equal respect for persons (e.g. in Kantianism and Kantian-

inspired theories) or universal benevolence, equal care or concern (featuring paradigmatically e.g. in utilitarian theory) (see Darwall, 2006). To this, I have been alluding in the discussion of what we should see as the basis of equal social consideration in our conception of egalitarian relations.

Our moral reasons can be taken as expressing these considerations. And there is a foundational view that grounds all such reasons, namely one grounded in our shared *basic* moral equality. As Wallace (2021) writes,

“[t]here is a characteristically modern way of thinking about morality that has defined the agenda of ethical theorizing in the European tradition since the 19th century. This approach to the moral is organized around the following commitments. First, there is the postulate of basic equality: the idea that the interests of any one person are neither more nor less important than the interests of others. From the moral point of view, we might say, people matter and matter equally.” (Wallace, 2021, 635)

That we possess equal moral worth is generally widely affirmed by contemporary moral philosophers (cf. Gosepath, 2021), albeit it is not uncontroversial (see e.g. Steinhoff, 2014). Be this as it may, in political theory specifically, as Kymlicka (1990) writes, the

“[f]undamental idea of equal respect for all persons and of the equal worth or equal dignity of all human beings is widely accepted [...] As a result, moral equality constitutes the ‘egalitarian plateau’ for all contemporary political theories.” (Kymlicka 1990, p. 5)

With morality’s ‘ever-expanding circle’ (Singer, 1981), basic moral equality serves as an important premise in contemporary moral and political theories of various flavours and directions. Thus, moral considerations can be considered as reflecting this basic equality and moral reasons as prescribing actions guided by these considerations. As Kymlicka presents it, this has arguably some important egalitarian implications for how we think about our claims on others, about what we are owed and ourselves owe to them. And indeed, we could go about and make use of this for our purpose – we could establish the demands for egalitarian social relations as grounded in our prudential interests and guided by moral reasons from basic equality. This provides a simple and *prima facie* attractive view: we have moral reasons to act so as to make our social reality reflect our basic moral equality.

A generic statement in favour of an egalitarian social relations claim (henceforth, ESRC), derived from such a view, reads as follows:

Generic ESRC: Given that we are all (moral) equals (in some, basic, sense), in social contexts, we have moral reasons to establish egalitarian social relations between us, so that each of us and our interests in exercising agency socially count equally.

The view expressed in this statement is simple because it sees our claims to egalitarian social relations as straightforwardly implied by our basic moral equality. What is left is just to identify what those reasons actually prescribe; how we ought to promote, honour, or value in some other ways egalitarian social relations. And this view is generic because it is not restricted in scope. The moral reasons affect our social relations universally and individuals generally.

Some versions of positive social egalitarianism can, for example, be interpreted as a theory of political morality that is entailed exactly by such a statement – by demanding that the social relations between individuals should conform to their basic equality. As we have seen in Chapter 2, this is supported by the seminal accounts established by Anderson (1999) and Scheffler (2003/2005). Both argue that the demands of relational or democratic equality reflect our basic moral equality. However, as several authors have recently convincingly argued, grounding social egalitarianism this way is either implausible or in a sense trivial, and thus, runs into a dilemma.

So has van Wietmarschen (2024a), who claims that this approach is implausible because it presumably entails the sweeping claim that we have moral reasons to remake all social relations in egalitarian ways, to secure the demands of basic morality. Yet this arguably stretches the meaning of the normative demands of basic equality too wide. Basic moral equality specifies our equal moral worth in some fundamental terms. Here it seems that too much normative content is derived from considerations of such *basic* equality. But, if we alternatively decide to only pick from social relationships the ‘wrong’ ones, which we then claim ought to be reformed on grounds of our moral reasons of basic equality, then we threaten to trivialize the social egalitarian project because “any

view will hold that insofar as social relationships can violate the valid moral principles grounded in or constituting our equal moral worth, they should not” (van Wietmarschen, 2024a, 106). Such a grounding argument is trivial because the resulting conception lacks distinctive and substantive egalitarian content.

As Litalien states the lessons from the horns of this dilemma, for the simple view to be explanatorily powerful, we are owed a further explanation by those egalitarians who think that egalitarian social relations are just implied

“by our recognition of the equal moral status of every human agent. [...] relational egalitarians owe us one more step in their argument, a step that would tie the fact of moral equality with the requirement to relate to one another as social equals.” (Litalien, 2021, 84)

The straightforward view cannot establish this on its own, however. The concept of equal moral worth is simply compatible with too great a range of substantive conceptions of equality (see also van Wietmarschen, 2024a, 100).

This brings forth a particular challenge for any attempt to ground claims to egalitarian social relations and establishes two *desiderata* for the sought-after moral reasons to meet this challenge: not any such reasons suffice in specifying truly egalitarian demands, the moral reasons in question need to be *substantively* egalitarian in a further way and they need to be of proper *scope*. They cannot be simply derived from a formal and universal conception that is itself derived from the premise of moral equality (albeit considerations from basic equality reasonably will plausibly remain an important premise). Let us call this challenge the *test from egalitarian substance and scope*.

In that sense, the task is to find proper egalitarian reasons that pass this test – reasons reflecting considerations which apply to social contexts directly and which are sufficiently normatively independent from requirements stemming from our equal moral worth. Such reasons would explain why ought to socially consider other agents equally and adequately in our shared social contexts.

One way to understand and meet these criteria, is, by following Raz (1978/1986), in requiring such reasons for action to be of proper egalitarian form, viz. to derive from *strictly* egalitarian principles. Raz helpfully distinguishes between egalitarian principles that only appear so in name and appearance and those that strictly promote equality. Under the former falls, for example, the ‘rhetorical’ egalitarianism that is expressed in principles of universal entitlement such as those of equal respect or concern. These invoke equality “often to gain from the good name that ‘equality’ has in our culture” (Raz, 1986, 228) but really are merely an assertion of humanism. A theory is humanistic if it is concerned with the well-being of all human beings. Principles of such theories then promote the cause of those falling under an independently valid principle of entitlement (to education, poverty relief, etc.) but can be stated without reference to equality. They are consistent with some having more of it than others and hence with inequalities.

Strictly egalitarian principles, on the other hand, have equality as their ground. Principles of egalitarian conflict resolution are, for example, of that kind. So is the assertion that “[i]n scarcity each who has equal entitlement is entitled to an equal share” (ibid., 223) representing one such principle. In contrast to principles of universal entitlement (‘all human beings are entitled to equal concern’), it is restricted. The scope of the entitlement depends on the number of individuals who fall under the entitlement. These principles aim to achieve equality for all who qualify under its scope.

Such egalitarian principles are, in general, according to Raz, of the following form: ‘All Fs who do not have a G have a claim to G if some Fs have G’ (ibid., 225). Principles of egalitarian conflict resolution are but one special case of such principles. What is crucial for these is that they are sensitive to existing distributions:

“It is the actually existing inequality of distribution which creates the entitlement. The entitlement is designed to eliminate a specific kind of existing inequality. Such principles reflect the view that it is wrong or unjust for some Fs to have G while others have not. Such inequalities must be remedied.” (ibid., 226)

Only in this form can we call a principle, strictly egalitarian. Now, with that in mind, we can attempt to formulate an egalitarian principle for social relations that in turn should inform the structure of the moral reasons that we are after. Consider the following description:

Strictly egalitarian principle for social relations: For a given social context, all subjected have a claim to be treated (and regarded) with adequate social consideration and, beyond that, with the same of it as others, if some receive a higher social consideration. That is, they have a claim to be situated in egalitarian social relations with others.

As we can see, this resembles a strictly egalitarian principle in the Razian sense³⁶ but modified for our purpose. Its ground is arguably in equality – it is designed to achieve equality – and its scope is restricted to ‘distributions’ of social consideration for a given social context. If some people’s social consideration for, let’s say, their role is higher than mine, then I simply have a claim to be an equally regarded and treated agent – on a level that is adequate for exercising social agency well.

This principle then coheres with the account of the nature of egalitarian social relations established in prior chapters. Yet, it differs from strictly egalitarian principles in the fact that it is constrained by a threshold of adequacy. As such, it does not entail waste. Levelling down others’ social consideration below a threshold of adequacy is not desired nor for that reason prescribed. This principle still expresses the strictly egalitarian conviction that one has a claim to enjoy egalitarian social relations when one lacks the level of social consideration that others don’t. But beyond that, it prescribes that all should be brought to a level of adequacy that is healthy for the exercise of social agency. It is thus a threshold-sensitive principle reflecting both the non-comparative as well as comparative elements of the nature of valuable egalitarian social relations that I have argued for earlier.

³⁶ Where we should depart from Raz’s description of strictly egalitarian principles, is his further assertion that these are ‘usually insatiable, non-diminishing’ in nature, viz. their demands cannot usually be completely met, and the strength of reasons for bringing about the entitlement does not vary with its enjoyed level. As I define the *Strictly egalitarian principle for social relations*, it is, *pace* Raz, a partly satiable and (likely) diminishing principle that is nevertheless egalitarian in all other respects.

Orienting ourselves on such a principle is, I argue, instructive for attempting to ground and justify claims to egalitarian social relations. Building on moral reasons which conform to this egalitarian principle goes some way in circumventing the issues that haunt the simple, generic way of grounding claims to egalitarian social relations in basic moral equality. Filling their content with independent, substantive egalitarian considerations about the moral worth of placing individuals in such social relations, lets us further carve out their normative features. This yields egalitarian moral reasons which are not problematically universal, and which are not trivial. Establishing reasons in that way passes the *test from egalitarian substance and scope*. This allows us to make a distinctive normative claim as to why social relations ought to be egalitarian. On that basis, the arguments in 4.2 and 4.3 shall demonstrate that, in fact, two sets of such egalitarian reasons for advancing our interests in egalitarian social relations can be established.

Before moving on and turning to this endeavour though, let me lastly say a few preliminary things about the notion of claims that figures prominently in this discussion. When I refer to ‘claims’, what I have in mind is what we may ask of others in simple and basic terms. Claims can be characterized as being held by natural, individual persons, which are directed at other agents, and grounded in the interests of individual persons. Claims have special stringency or priority and failing to act on a claim thus leads to a complaint on the complainant’s side (see Kolodny, 2023, 13). As such, claims are regulating primarily interpersonal conduct and form part of morality in the ‘narrow sense’ (Raz, 1986, 213) or of ‘what we owe to each other’ (Scanlon, 1998).

To argue that we have claims to egalitarian social relations is, on my view, to say that an individual has a relevant interest in being placed in such relations, an interest to which others should pay due concern and thus concur with actions to meet this claim. Our moral reasons are considerations about such an interest that establish when one has such a comparative egalitarian claim, and which actions are mandated for it to be met. Insofar as moral reasons are understood as *pro tanto* wrong- or right-making features of actions, the reasons cited in the upcoming two sections give rise to *pro*

tanto egalitarian claims. Our claims to egalitarian social relations thus generally apply to specific social contexts but can be outweighed by other considerations, presumably moral or otherwise.

I will have to say more about the nature of these claims in section 4.4, but for now and with the prerequisites set, let me turn to an examination of our relevant moral reasons that will allow us to eventually defend and justify claims to egalitarian social relations. Taking the distinction between close, personal relationships and wide, societal relations, that I have proposed earlier in Chapter 1, seriously, I shall consider and analyse the relevant considerations and moral reasons in these archetypical social contexts separately and in turn.

4.2 Egalitarian reasons for promoting social agency – the case of close, personal relationships

The first set of moral reasons that I want to introduce and discuss concerns the case for egalitarian relations in social contexts of close, personal relationships. These contexts are, as I have described them in Chapter 1, marked by social relations with a particular degree of density. As social relations in general, they exhibit a robust degree of temporal and spatial stability and durability but can be differentiated from wider social relations insofar as the individuals featured in them have regular, mostly face-to-face social interactions. Paradigm examples of such relationships are (biological or social) families, spousal relations, or friendships, but also workplace relations, clubs, local faith or communitarian meetings and assemblies. They thus include relationships based on ‘natural’ ties (as *per* the social forms and institutions that were developed over time for representing them in society), small-scale voluntary communities and relations of association. As such, they are also most plausibly relationships of the kind that require an element of mutual regard in addition to mutual treatment in order for their relations to amount to an egalitarian form. To enjoy egalitarian social relations in close, personal relationships is to be regarded and treated with adequate and roughly equal social consideration for our agential pursuits, viz. for the projects and relationships to which we commit ourselves.

With that in mind, what are the moral considerations that speak in favour of individuals having a claim to such regard and treatment in those relations? To be sure, once we take the idea of the ‘primacy of action reasons’ seriously, hence think of personal well-being as partly (or, considerably) constituted by successful exercises of agency (see Chapter 3; cf. Raz, 1986, 305ff.), it is only sensible to think that these well-being interests would somehow connect to moral reasons. That they would at least figure somewhat in our moral calculus for how to act. Yet, in the case of close personal relationships, I argue that there are even especially weighty moral reasons for valuing egalitarian social relations. Several considerations show, I believe, why this is the case.

First, close and personal relationships are arguably particularly important for a variety of relational goods. Love, mutual support, or a sense of solidarity carry them. They are also a special source of self-esteem, for the formation of stable personal identities, for discharging responsibility and thus for establishing us as practical agents in the moral sense. The responses from our near and dear to our agential pursuits are both important and weighty for how we think of ourselves, about the ends we pursue and the means by which we attempt to achieve them. Not least because the social feedback we receive is unmediated and direct in such relations, can we, therefore, anticipate that such relationships and their kind of treatment and regard are particularly likely to nurture our capacities for exercising social agency.

A similar point is sometimes suggested in discussions of doxastic³⁷ wrongdoing. The “feelings we are prone to have when our loved ones think the worst of us” (Basu & Schroeder, 2018, 182) and the grievances to which this leads when such beliefs are unfounded, are, for example, captured in these types of wrongs. We feel wounded when those close to us hold us in negative or unequal regard for the wrong reasons. The attitudes and beliefs of our loved ones are intimately tied to our perception of ourselves. Being regarded and treated as an equal then, is particularly beneficial to

³⁷ That is, wrongs directed at persons that are committed by beliefs, in virtue of what is believed, and where there wrongdoing lies in the beliefs itself rather than in its consequences (cf. Basu & Schroeder, 2018, 181f.).

our capacities for robust social agency. Support for this also comes from the vast literature on the nature and conditions of robust self-respect and self-esteem. As Schemmel (2021) convincingly argues, having robust self-respect, a robust belief “that one is a moral agent subject to the same basic moral demands as all other agents” and robust self-esteem, “the conviction that one is capable of developing, and carrying out, on the basis of one’s talents and capacities, projects and activities that have value, and thus are worth carrying out” (Schemmel, 2021, 179), is intimately tied to good close relationships. Local communities and support networks are conducive to self-respect and self-esteem. Egalitarian close, personal relationships are among their sources; they plausibly are one of their social bases (cf. Schemmel, 2019). Having such robust self-esteem from closely related peers likely increases our capacities for discharging responsibility – an important aspect of exercising agency in itself (cf. Litalien, 2021, 67f.).

It is thus sensible to assume, I think, that enjoying egalitarian social relations in small-scale relationships has a stronger effect on the likelihood of realising the non-instrumental value of exercising agency than in other, large-scale contexts.

But there are other considerations to this effect, too. Note that we have more power and control over the form and function of social relationships when they are close and personal. The fact that such relationships are immediate allows for a greater degree of malleability. The terms of my friendships, let’s say, are more easily set or changed by me and my friends themselves, than in other societal relations that we enter involuntarily, and which are maintained by informal social rules or formal social institutions. We can, relatively freely choose how we want our friendship to evolve, how exactly we want to relate to each other, and so forth. Moreover, we can more easily identify and correct others if they treat or regard some inadequately or unequally. For that reason, as participants in such relationships, we have also more control over the effects on the prospective success of others’ exercises of social agency – since our responses, our treatments and regard, have

considerable weight for how others reason about and pursue their ends within our shared social context.

Relatedly to this point, it is also (usually) not very costly or difficult to change one's attitudes and dispositions about others' agential pursuits, hence, to adjust our expressed social consideration. To treat and regard others as authoritative and their pursuits as worthy of admiration is considerably easier in relationships where we know others face-to-face and have regular personal interactions. Whereas esteem is not easily just given to anyone, we can more straightforwardly acknowledge e.g. our friends' commitments to projects and hold their pursuits in decent regard. Even more, the intimacy or relative proximity between us individuals in such relationships also facilitates seeing and treating them as our equals. Despite any personal differences between us, our profound common history in a joint project or relationship just shows us why receiving unequal social consideration would be arbitrary and morally defective. In small-scale relationships, deviating from a norm of equality more clearly appears to be simply unmotivated.

These considerations have some implications for how to think about the moral dimension of egalitarian social relations in close personal relationships. On the one hand, on grounds of the particular relevance of such social relations, combined with the great effect that we have on others' social agency and the greater power and control that we exercise over their form and function; it is reasonable to ask of us to relate to others decently and as equals. These social relationships bear special normative weight for realising the value of social agency, and we can, I would argue, rightfully be asked to conform with requirements that promote these agential exercises. Moreover, the fact that it is not overly costly for us to adjust to the standards of egalitarian social relations is also morally salient. Achieving egalitarian social relations is practically feasible in close and personal relationships and doing so is achievable without great sacrifices to individuals.

The point of these considerations is that it shows that we can advance others' interests in enjoying egalitarian relations, on grounds of the value of effective social agency, equally and without

compromising much of either our own interests or others' further morally significant interests. On the contrary, relating to others as equals in close relationships is not only most likely of little cost but also beneficial to us as well. On these grounds, I argue that these considerations from reasonableness and feasibility combined, imply that we indeed have special moral reasons to value egalitarian social relations in such social contexts. Reasons that tell us that we should act in ways that bring about egalitarian social relations. This implies that we do not have just some generic reasons, but moral reasons to promote that people relate as equals in close personal relationships, that is, we have reasons for extending the web of egalitarian social relatedness and for attempting to instantiate such relations where we can in these social contexts.

The moral reasons, that I propose reflect these considerations, are sort of a telic or consequential nature. They are concerned with the outcomes or states of affairs and are thus reasons to promote the good. Based on considerations of the value of our interests in social agency, they prescribe reforming close, personal relationships where we find them in order to increase agents' capacities for exercising social agency. We should support others in their agential pursuits and seek to enable people to follow through on their action reasons and secure (some of) their personal well-being in doing so. Our egalitarian reasons for actions, thus understood, tell us to act in ways that assure that individuals enjoy close relationships where they receive egalitarian social consideration. These are then, in a sense, rather demanding moral reasons.

One way to better understand the nature of these normative reasons is by considering them from the perspective of agent-neutrality and agent-relativity. This distinction, already established earlier by Nagel (1970) but made popular by Parfit (1984), has played an important role in normative theorising ever since (cf. Buckland, 2017/2019). While there are several proposals for how this distinction should be drawn in the philosophical literature (see Ridge, 2023), a fairly general description of this classification is the following, offered by Löschke (2021):

“a reason is agent-relative if its full specification includes an ineliminable reference to the agent who has the reason, and that a reason is agent-neutral if it includes no such reference.” (Löschke, 2021, 360)

On that account, agent-relative reasons are pronominally referencing in a way that agent-neutral reasons are not. The latter are not equally ‘indexed’ (see Pettit, 1987, 75). Whereas the former specify requirements or prohibitions for some individual agents, agent-neutral reasons give us ‘common aims’ (Ridge, 2023) that are valid for any person instead. This is not to say that the former are less objective in any sense. But this is a philosophically important distinction that “expresses the idea that as valuing beings, some things are more important to us than others” (Löschke, 2021, 371). For the same reason, most substantive consequentialist views (safe ethical egoism) build on agent-neutral recommendations while deontological theories primarily specify agent-relative requirements, permissibility or prohibitions instead. This is thus one way how these ethical views can be divided.

In consulting this distinction, we may be puzzled by what I have said about our moral reasons for advancing egalitarian relations in close, personal social relationships. They appear to be both agent-relative as well as agent-neutral! They seem agent-relative in the sense that they derive their validity from the relationships that we share with others. Indeed, as Löschke further clarifies, “most authors accept three kinds of agent-relative reasons, namely relationship-dependent reasons, project-dependent reasons, and deontological restrictions” (ibid., 360). Ours, then, should be relationship-dependent (and maybe project-dependent) agent-relative reasons – since it is apparently the fact that I have a relationship with another person that suggests to me a reason to act on the relevant egalitarian prescriptions towards her. But this seems to square badly with the outcome-oriented direction that I have claimed these reasons have. Namely, that these give us the rather common aim that we should act so that individuals, in general, have the capacities to exercise their agency socially well by enjoying egalitarian close, personal relationships. From this point, these reasons

seem to be rather agent-neutral. Therefore, assuming that they are of either one type, would have us give up on one of these assertions.

That said, I believe we can rescue both of these valid intuitions and formulate one, coherent position on the nature of these reasons. The solution to this problem turns, I suggest, on the particular way how we substantiate agent-relative reasons. Instead of distinguishing between normative reasons on ontological grounds, as many accounts do (cf. Ridge, 2023), Löschke provides us with a (perspective-based) conception of agent-relativity “as a feature that affects the normative force or the strength of a reason that I already have” (Löschke, 2021, 367). The normative force of some reasons, on his account, cannot be explained without reference to the relevant relationships or projects. This outlook is similar to Wallace’s view, according to which some “considerations provide one agent with reasons to do something, without having the same kind of normative significance for other agents who are differently situated” (Wallace, 2010, 519). Thus, whereas the authority of a reason might stem from a reference to a particular agent, the existence of the reason does not:

“[s]aying that considerations provide one agent with reasons to do something without having the same kind of normative significance for others can mean either that these considerations do not give other agents reasons, or it can mean that the considerations give other agents reasons, but with a different normative force.” (Löschke, 2021, 367)

This is an attractive approach to understanding agent-relative reasons that helps us make sense of the egalitarian reasons that I propose are valid in close, personal relationships: while those reasons are agent-neutral in the sense that they apply to all and give a common aim to everyone, the normative force of the reasons differs when I look at my own social relationships and those of others. Being in a certain relationship might give me particularly strong agent-relative considerations to act and bring mine closer to the egalitarian ideal, but this does not mean that this reason ceases to exist when I consider others and their relationships. We still can consistently hold

that we have, even weighty, reasons to care that others have venues for valuable exercises of social agency in close, personal egalitarian relationships, too.

Cashing out the content of these moral reasons in such a way thus resonates with commonly held intuitions that we are under special moral obligations towards those close to us. Obligations, the force of which permits us to benefit especially those with whom we share special relationships (see Jeske, 2022, but cf. Singer, 1972). Whether or not one agrees with the well-established views on this subject though, the argument from above yields conclusions that concurs well with such intuitions. Moreso, it cites independent considerations for why we have especially demanding moral reasons to relate as equals in close, personal relationships. Reasons that make sense of special moral obligations in a novel way, by relying on the value of exercising agency socially. As such, the account of moral reasons developed here, adds further support to the existence of special moral obligations.

Assuming that the argument so far is correct, we have therefore found some substantive reasons for advancing egalitarian social relations. This meets one part of the *test from egalitarian substance and scope*. Yet are those reasons also properly egalitarian in nature? Recall from the above that the sought-after moral reasons should have their ground in equality and be derived from suitably egalitarian principles. The line of reasoning in this section seems to bear more resemblance with maximising or sufficientarian rather than egalitarian principles. The moral considerations might, for example, be interpreted as recommending that individuals should be brought in the best possible, and not necessarily equal, position, in which they can follow through on their agency reasons³⁸. The claims we then derive from them would not be properly egalitarian.

Note, however, that these claims retain a significant comparative dimension. What can be reasonably asked of us is, that we treat and regard others with adequate and roughly equal social consideration. Our interests in egalitarian social relations are genuine: it is those social relations

³⁸ For the idea of relational sufficientarianism that seeks to account for these intuitions, see Bengtson & Nielsen (2023).

that nurture social agency and realise the value in agential exercises. Equality in treatment (and regard) between social agents is what brings valuable acts of social agency to fruition (see the end of Chapter 3). Thus, promoting social relations of that quality between individuals simply appears to be the best possible position to put individuals in. Absent special justifications and considerations there is then no reason that anyone should receive less social consideration in their agential pursuits than others. On the contrary, once some agents are treated (or regarded) with higher social consideration, the opposite type of consideration becomes salient. The moral reasons to promote egalitarian social relations reflect this comparative requirement. These reasons are thus sensitive to existing distributions as well as appropriately limited in scope (as to particular social contexts).

We can therefore submit that our substantive moral reasons for promoting such close and personal social relationships are indeed of an egalitarian nature. In sum, this allows us to claim that there is a strong egalitarian *pro tanto* case in favour of promoting egalitarian relationships whenever individuals find themselves in close, personal relationships.

Nothing of the so far established reasoning implies that these *pro tanto* considerations will always, regularly, or at all prove to be conclusive. Whether there are all things considered judgments about bringing about egalitarian relationships will depend on other, moral and non-moral considerations. Yet, someone generally sceptic towards the proposed egalitarian case might object in the following way: what about the close, personal relationships that we usually take to be valuable, but which are inherently, by nature, hierarchical? Where the value realised is a function of hierarchical or inegalitarian relations. Consider parent-child, teacher-student, or mentor-mentee relationships that involve clear authority asymmetries between their subjects³⁹. Can we speak of strong *pro tanto* moral considerations even there, despite those apparent differences?

³⁹ Hierarchical relations between members of communities of faith may, in some respect, be another such example.

First, parent-child relationships might be a clearer case of hierarchical relations that are necessary for the parent or parental guardian to protect and promote the interests of the child. There are strong moral considerations that favour inegalitarian social relations to secure the overall purpose and value of their relationship. This is consistent with saying that there still are moral considerations in favour of an egalitarian relationship. In fact, we might want to say that parents should treat their children as equals whenever possible, save the age and circumstances when hierarchical relations appear to be necessary to protect the children's morally significant interests. The case is arguably more difficult with regard to teacher-student or mentor-mentee relationships. In these scenarios, the hierarchical character partly constitutes the worth of these relationships, assuming that only inegalitarian relations between their participants can realise the value of these relationships. But instead of giving up on the idea of moral considerations favouring egalitarian relations in these cases, I am drawn to a different explanation here⁴⁰: while the hierarchical character of these relationships is seemingly necessary, and is all things considered justified, it is still regrettable. While these relationships make distinct goods possible that we could otherwise not obtain – which provides us with overriding reasons to value them and not see them as bad at all – such inegalitarian relationships are still bads when they occur. Our attachments to such relations may give us compelling reasons not to recognise them as such, but they are nevertheless something to be regretted. If we could, we should have egalitarian relationships of these types instead. In our world though, we may think of these inegalitarian relationships as justified because of the distinct goods they enable (cf. Kolodny, 2023, 120f; see also section 5.4 in the subsequent chapter).

We will see later, in Chapter 5, which substantive considerations, in general, can outweigh or exclude these reasons to promote egalitarian social relationships, but the overall picture so far should be clear. The egalitarian moral reasons cited here reflect considerations for advancing our well-being interests in exercising social agency. On that basis, they recommend promoting others'

⁴⁰ An explanation inspired by Kolodny's (2023) illuminating discussion of a similarly-spirited thought experiment 'Hierarcadia', attributed to Joseph Raz.

capacities for social agency equally, hence, to instantiate (more) egalitarian social relations. Yet, that said, none of this implies that only these interests count morally nor that all well-being interests are to be subsumed under them. There simply often are other moral considerations that we have reason to act on and which constrain following our considerations in bringing about egalitarian social relationships in close, personal social contexts.

To recap before moving on, our moral reasons thus recommend establishing egalitarian social relations on a *pro tanto* basis. On egalitarian grounds, we have reasons to promote, create or reform, social relations so that everyone is in a decent and roughly equal situation to exercise their agency socially. This, in sum, is the case for the morality of egalitarian social relations in close, personal relationships. But this of course only concerns one type of social relationships. Let us thus shift the focus towards social contexts that involve relations of a relatively different nature.

4.3 Egalitarian reasons of respect for social agents' statuses – the case of wide, societal relations

Turning to social contexts that exhibit characteristics of what I termed wide or societal relations in Chapter 1, some preliminary remarks reiterating the main assumptions are needed. Recall from earlier chapters that the theoretical distinction between narrow and wide social relations(hips) is plausibly taken not to be clear-cut. Rather, we have reason to think that social relations exist on a range or scale between close, personal relationships and wider, societal relations. We do have a clear grasp of paradigm examples of clearly personal relationships, such as familial, spousal, or amicable relations, and of wider societal relations, such as the relations between citizens in political society. Some social contexts, however, feature social relations that arguably fall between the cracks of this theoretical framework. For example, professional relations could be interpreted of either type (as workplace relations in the close, personal sense, or as occupational roles featuring in the wider sense) and it is an open question whether cross-border social relationships fall in any of the two categories (but see Sharp, 2022). Nevertheless, as I have argued before, we should make such

a distinction at least on pragmatic grounds. Focussing on the paradigm cases is, so I claim, instructive for evaluating those social contexts about which we have more ambiguous intuitions.

With that in mind, what are the characteristics of the second paradigmatic type of social relations cited above, those of a wide and societal nature? These social relations differ from close, personal ones insofar as they do not presuppose immediate and regular face-to-face interactions. Such relations are in a sense rather ‘impersonal’, as those participating in or subjected to these relationships do not e.g. personally know their co-participants or co-subjects. They hardly engage directly with all or any of them regularly. Yet, they are still both commonly thought to be socially related and are also so on the account of social relatedness defended earlier. People so related are able to causally affect their others’ choice situation, albeit not through face-to-face encounters. They fulfil the conditions of social relatedness to a lesser extent or in the outmost abstract form, so to speak. Prime examples of this paradigmatic type of social relations are the aforementioned relations of political community, sustained by formal and legal relations but also societal relations that are maintained by a system of informal norms. In any case, as I suggested earlier, we can say of them that these social relations are in one sense or another, *mediated*.

This feature of wide social relations – that they are mediated ways of how individuals are socially related – should be, and this is one thesis of this section, interpreted in terms of a *status* that is assigned, attributed, or otherwise ascribed to those who are part to these relations. Whether these social relations are mediated by explicit social institutions such as the law, or implicit ones such as social norms, individuals should be considered as agents bearing a specific relation-dependent status (cf. Turner, 1988). An agent’s commitment, e.g. in taking up a social role, is reflected or expressed in the form of a status ascribed to them as individuals. Be this legal, political, or social status, the concept of status attribution is crucial here. Its conceptual and normative characteristics need some further explanation, however.

To generalise from the notion of moral status with which we are intuitively more familiar, a central feature of status is, as Viehoff (2019) describes, “that it attributes to us a range of rights and duties that are one step removed from the characteristics on which the attribution of that status seems to rest” (Viehoff, 2019, 15). Once an individual is thought to carry a particular status, our evaluations for how to treat and regard them ought to track the abstract status position that they occupy, and not any of their immediate or observable behaviour. Think of the legal status of refugees or the social status of the working class. Each assigns a range of responses that are thought to be justified by the idea behind these statuses, not the underlying empirical preconditions that qualify us as carrying those. Thus, in a normative sense, status

“[...] involves a gap between what triggers the attribution of a particular status to someone (their *quality*) and what response to the bearers of superior status is thought to be appropriate given that status (their *claim*). Status, in other words, is a non-eliminable intermediate step in the justification of its bearer’s claim, a step that makes the claim about something other than simply the underlying quality (age, behaviour, performance).” (Viehoff, 2019, 15)

Understanding status in these terms has certain implications. Overall, it entails that status is a necessary part of determining what we are entitled to. What we are owed is partly justified by and because of the status we carry. In our case specifically, claiming that societal relations necessarily involve status ascriptions, entails that the content of individuals’ claims is partly dependent on relations and the status they occupy therein. This further implies that as subjects to these social relations, the treatment we are entitled to receive responds to the status we carry, not directly to the underlying features or characteristics of ours that make us occupy it. In that sense, I take it that status is a non-eliminable part of the justification of our moral claims as agents in wide, societal relations.

Furthermore, status ascriptions can be a mediated way of being socially related only if they are a social, legal, or otherwise relation-dependent *fact* of its social reality. The paradigm example of social status can essentially be explained by a system of operative, widespread social norms (see e.g.

Brennan et al., 2013; Bicchieri, 2016). Social norms enable and sustain a society's members' social consideration, to put it in the terms employed in this thesis. If there is an operative social norm that attributes to a certain person (or group of persons) a specific amount of consideration, then those members of society are assigned a particular level of social standing. Likewise, when the way institutions work reflects such norms, they sustain that standing indirectly. Thus, such status ascriptions are typically maintained by stratified social norms (cf. van Wietmarschen, 2022/2024b), yet in some social relations, an assigned status might be sustained through explicit legal systems, and so forth. In any case, such statuses are a fact, because they are publicly and commonly known.

Correspondingly, our moral considerations about egalitarian social relations in such social contexts plausibly reflect this postulate about the relevance of status ascriptions. The thesis that I want to advance in this section is that our egalitarian moral reasons in favour of egalitarian relations are considerations for honouring the status of social agents equally in wide, societal relations. This is, I believe, (part of) what we are owed as a matter of *respect*. Let me unpack this claim first, before showing the considerations in its support.

First, arguing that the moral reasons in question are based on considerations for honouring people's statuses, is to say that they are deontological⁴¹ in nature. They are expressing duties or obligations⁴² that have their moral justification irrespectively of the consequences they bring about. Rather, they derive their normative force from how they honour the good. Such duties are normally taken to classify actions in terms of what is required, prohibited, or permitted (see e.g. Alexander & Moore, 2024). They serve as constraints on actions, not states of affairs to be realised or maximised. For us here, deontological moral reasons are thus best understood not as considerations for promoting the good of egalitarian social relations but as considerations derived from a moral norm that specifies what the morally right choices vis-à-vis this good are. Such a norm typically has different

⁴¹ In saying they are deontological, I am referring here very broadly to theories that treat the 'good' independently from the 'right', and assign priority to the latter over the former (see Tappolet, 2021).

⁴² No more fine-grained distinction is necessary for the argument here and I will use these terms interchangeably.

content than the imperative to advance (maximise, or otherwise) the good, hence these deontological moral reasons differ from the outcome-centred reasons that we encountered in the previous section.

In contrast to those, the reasons which have significant force in societal relations are decidedly of an agent-relative nature. These reasons specify the actions we ought to take or refrain from taking towards others in a joint relation and they constitute reasons for us, because and insofar as it is us who feature in this social relation. To be specific, these are agent-centred reasons. As Alexander & Moore (2024) explain, their underlying idea is

“that morality is intensely personal, in the sense that we are each enjoined to keep our own moral house in order. [...] The focus of our categorical obligations is to keep our own agency free of moral taint.” (Alexander & Moore, 2024)

On these grounds, we ought to act according to a deontological norm that informs us about how we can retain a moral character. This is the sort of normativity which I want to argue that we encounter in wider, societal relations. In fact, I shall maintain that the relevant norm informing those reasons in wide, societal relations is one of egalitarian respect. What is morally significant about egalitarian social relations here, is then not so much their personal value (as in the case of close, personal relationships) but that they are a deontological moral requirement, part and parcel of what we owe to others as a matter of respect. The normative claim about this type of social relations is thus somewhat detached yet still connected to the overall evaluative view that acts in the background and which I have defended earlier in this thesis.

Now, this notion of respect requires further explanation as well. To start with, to be respected is often seen as a certain standard of treatment by others which any moral person can take for granted. It is widely accepted in the scholarly literature on respect that a fundamental distinction between two types of such respect can be drawn; between what is sometimes labelled as standing and standard, or as recognition and appraisal respect. Whereas the latter half of the conceptual pairs

refer to an attitude that has as its exclusive objects “persons or features which are held to manifest their excellence as persons or as engaged in some specific pursuit” (Darwall, 1977, 38), the former is particularly relevant to us, as

“the disposition to give appropriate weight or consideration in one’s practical deliberations to some fact about the object and to regulate one’s conduct by constraints derived from that fact.” (Dillon, 2022)

Whereas appraisal respect tells us something about how we should ‘quantitatively’ respond to the particular qualities that people have, recognition respect is in another sense ‘qualitative’. It tells us which objects are worthy of respect in the first place. Familiar examples of recognition respect concern the attitude we often have towards people’s positions or roles. In moral theory specifically, recognition respect has typically been understood in a specific, valuing way. Moral recognition respect values certain objects from the moral point of view, giving content to the idea of equal moral worth or basic equality that we have encountered above. Equal recognition respect for persons, which is grounded in their equal moral worth, specifies a norm of how we ought to respond to people in some fundamental sense due to our shared basic equality.

But this type of standing or recognition respect can have a wide array of objects. A norm specifying recognition respect can be concerned with laws, social institutions, the selves and identities of individuals, or moral personhood, just to give a few examples (see *ibid.*). A natural contender for an object of recognition respect are also people’s many other statuses. An individual’s legal or social status may itself be an object worthy of recognition, independent of the particular underlying qualities or her basic equal moral worth (see Middleton, 2006, 63). This does not yet tell us anything substantively about how we ought to treat people specifically because of this, but such a norm offers some way of conceptualising the idea that individuals’ statuses justify certain entitlements or duties of respect.

So, in sum, I want to make the case for the idea that our sought-after deontological moral reasons vis-à-vis egalitarian social relations should in this specific sense be understood as egalitarian reasons of respect for individuals' agential statuses in wide, societal relations. We can express this, formally, as following from an egalitarian deontological norm like this:

Egalitarian respect for social agents. For any person in a shared wide societal relation, we have reasons to respect their agential status equally, that is, we have reasons to treat such status holders with adequate and equal social consideration.

This principle recommends that we honour the good of social agency that is nurtured by egalitarian social relations, by prescribing an egalitarian norm of recognition⁴³ respect for people's social statuses. This norm of respect specifies reasons for actions that are required or permissible for recognising individuals carrying a social status as equally and adequately authoritative and esteem-worthy agents.

So, with this in mind, what exactly should we take these moral reasons of respect to express? Like the broader notion of recognition respect, they reflect considerations about the treatment one should receive because of their ascribed or attributed status in such social relations. Specifically, I argue, their concern lies with the impact of individuals' statuses on their social agential pursuits. They are reasons that take into account both that being an effective social agent is morally significant – that individuals have valid interests in following through on their action reasons in entrenched social relations and that egalitarian relations are beneficial for those exercises of agency – as well as the facts about the mediated nature of wide, societal relations and the effects that relation-dependent status ascriptions have on individuals' agential commitments. In other words, they reflect egalitarian concerns with the appropriate treatment of social agents as status bearers in mediated wider social relations.

⁴³ This idea thus bear some resemblance to Honneth's well-known theory of recognition for a conception of justice (see e.g. Honneth, 2013), but deviates from this approach in its focus on specifically egalitarian demands.

Based on this, being treated with equal social consideration is construed in terms of respect with which status holders are recognised. This standing respect has their status as its object, and, conforming with the requirements derived from the ideal of egalitarian social relations before, asserts that individuals' statuses are equally recognised. That is, we mutually treat⁴⁴ status holders as agents with adequate and equal factual authority and social esteem. Our treatment of others in these societal relations should reflect their equal status as authoritative and esteem-worthy agents. A teacher's ascribed status, on grounds of their social role, should be equally recognised and respected as other professional roles in the social context of society. And a solitary hermit, who goes along living their life in the woods, should also be equally respected as an agent, who should be seen as authoritative over their pursuits of the good life and the expressions of which we ought to equally recognise as esteem-worthy. Likewise, in shared societal relations, the fact that I am an equal social agent should be honoured – equally respected – in other people's deliberations. This is the content of the moral reasons for egalitarian social relations in those wider social contexts.

Note the direction that these agent-relative reasons take, though. In a sense, they point to negative demands, prohibitions and prescriptions that bar us from engaging in certain treatment. We have reason to refrain from interfering with others' conduct, on their basis. Recognising other agents as equals, is to equally respect their agential commitments that are expressed or reflected in status ascriptions. Some forms of non-interference are arguably part of recognition respect. We also ought not to question their particular conceptions of the good, the particular projects and relationships they pursue, but treat them as a given fact that we should respect. Respecting their equal status will also have us adjusting our behaviour so as not to hinder others from their agential pursuits. We

⁴⁴ As with the case of egalitarian reasons for close, personal relationships, there is arguably room for considerations about doxastic wronging here as well. Basu & Schroeder (2018), for example, argue that the wrongs of 'racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice' lie not only in their (manifold) harmful consequences but also, distinctively, in the beliefs that people hold. Similarly, regarding some agents because of their status as less deserving of social esteem may be a distinct violation of our claims to egalitarian societal relations. I do think that such a line of reasoning has merits. However, because of how I have earlier specified what egalitarian social relations require to obtain (i.e. only certain kinds of treatment) in these social contexts, I do not take a stance towards whether we have substantive egalitarian reasons to regard other status-holders as equals here, too.

will not neglect other agents but mutually treat each other in ways that accommodate our respective commitments and be wary if some individuals are impeded in the exercise of their social agency because of how their status is evaluated.

This is what being treated with adequate and equal social consideration entails in these contexts. This is because the normativity of these reasons stems, as Valentini (2021/2023) similarly argues, from a “*pro tanto* duty to respect people’s permissible exercises of agency – specifically, their commitments as agents, provided those commitments are morally permissible” (Valentini, 2021, 386). As Valentini writes, in a spirit close to this thesis’ argument, we ought to respect others as self-constituting, commitment-making agents that create and build normative worlds through their agential pursuits (see Valentini, 2023, 86f.). This places obligations on us to acknowledge and accommodate others’ commitments equally, not to interfere with them, facilitate the situation for their pursuits, and the like. This is what I describe as respecting the good of social agency, which is realised in egalitarian social relations, requires.

Now, a sceptic will want to call for a pause for reflection at this point. They might say the following: even if we tend to accept that we have egalitarian reasons of respect for other agents’ social statuses in these cases, this might be because we think particularly well of these people’s agential commitments. And this is so because their commitments strike us as morally permissible or even of special value. Our recognition respect for people’s statuses is not arbitrary in that sense but tracks certain valuable characteristics. But what about statuses assigned based on other agential pursuits, like the type of a somewhat prominent philosophical figure, the *Malibu Surfer* (cf. Van Parijs, 1991)?

Imagine the *Malibu Surfer* as someone whose conception of the good life consists solely of spending as much time as possible surfing the beaches of Malibu. Instead of picking up any traditional type of work, they rather surf and for that reason would seek to benefit from assurance laws. It is a matter of contestation of what this entails for matters of distributive justice, whether we should

think of them as lazy slackers, as entitled to some such leisure time, or whether we should actually financially support them in following through on their respective projects (ibid., 101f.). But should we also recognise them, or rather, respect the social status they are ascribed equally? Our intuitions here might be quite different compared to the examples above. If we think of them as failing to contribute to society meaningfully, we might feel less inclined to see the reasons for respecting them as equal social agents.

Yet, I want to argue against this sort of objection. I believe that it misses the point because it mischaracterises the relevant notion of respect. First, recall that the value of exercising social agency has a robust relationship with moral permissibility. While, as I have claimed, the exercise of agency has some value even when bad ends are chosen, its value then is mostly instrumental and/or only minimally conducive to our ongoing process of normative self-creation. It is good moral ends that likely allow us to realise the full non-instrumental value of exercising agency. Thus, considerations of moral permissibility also apply here. As long as we think that what the *Malibu Surfer* is committing to is morally permissible, then we should recognise them as persons with equal interests in exercising valuable agency as well. What this does not mean, however, is that we have reasons to praise them as surfers. We might or might not give them high regard because of their skill and passion for surfing, but this is different from our reasons to recognise them as agents. We have egalitarian reasons against treating people carrying the status of surfers with less or inadequate social consideration. On the contrary, we should respect them equally as agents in our deliberations.

This might then also differ from how we think about this case in distributive terms and about the moral reasons that are valid from that perspective. The motivation for our reasons here stems, again, also from considerations of both reasonableness and feasibility. When understood correctly, paying equal recognition respect to agents' statuses is, so I want to claim, neither unreasonable to ask of us nor particularly costly to bring about. Thus, we can advance people's interests equally by adhering to the egalitarian norm of respect.

This becomes clearer when we consider the demands of these reasons. These are, as I have argued, of a different nature than those we found to apply in close, personal relationships. Whereas the latter favour a certain state of affairs – having as many individuals as possible enjoying egalitarian social relations, having as many as possible in a position to effectively exercise their agency socially – the moral reasons applying in societal relations retain their purely deontological features. As such, these reasons of respect are in a way less demanding than the moral reasons for promoting egalitarian social relationships. Partly because doing so would come at a high cost to individuals, partly because we simply cannot relate as equals towards strangers in mediated relations to the same extent as in close, personal relationships. We are much less in control, individually, in and over these social relations and are less likely able to directly evaluate or even have a clear effect on a person's exercises of social agency there. It would not be appropriate to ask us to actively support any stranger in their substantive commitments, but we have reason to acknowledge them as individuals just as capable and interested in doing so as us, hence as agents that should bear an equal status. Thus, whereas we ought to actively help the near and dear, we ought to primarily respect the agential pursuits of unfamiliar strangers. This, again, fits quite well into our general intuitions about the obligations that we have towards those we are closely related and towards those we are only loosely acquainted. Reasonableness and feasibility, once more, act as constraints on the moral reasons for advancing egalitarian social relations.

So, in that regard, I argue that we have moral reasons of respect in these wider societal relations. Again, however, we should ask whether these reasons meet the *test from egalitarian substance and scope*. One might initially be inclined to think otherwise and deny this. After all, it seems that a respect-based duty is non-comparative and universal in nature, reflecting a concern that any agent is (to some degree) recognised. Thus, it is questionable whether such reasons are also substantively egalitarian. Respect reasons appear to be more inherently related to abstract consideration derived

from our equal moral worth than others. Hence we would be prone to run into either the substantiveness- or the scope-horn of the dilemma explained earlier.

This concern notwithstanding, I believe the account of moral reasons proposed here can escape this twofold problem. Note first, that this view shares similarities with deontic versions of relational egalitarianism, which I have discussed in Chapter 2. According to those views, to relate as equals is required by a deontological norm that itself is a fitting response to our basic equal moral worth. Such a moral requirement view, however, comes, as we have seen, with a certain scope limitation. To reiterate, on such a view:

“[W]e owe it to others *not* to relate to them in inegalitarian ways as that would be wrong in light of their equal status with moral authority, but there is no implication that we owe it to others to establish egalitarian relationships with them where they are absent, just on account of the significance of such relations. To put it differently, on this view we owe it to others that *if* we relate to them at all, we do so on egalitarian terms, but we do not owe it to them to *establish* egalitarian social relationships with them in the first place.” (Miklosi, 2018, 26f.)

Similarly, the moral reasons of respect, as I have articulated them, reflect a norm that only applies in wide, social relations. And these agent-relative reasons only arise insofar as we are in such relations in the first place. But, crucially, the account advanced in this chapter differs from generic deontic relational egalitarian views insofar as it cites genuine egalitarian reasons that derive their validity themselves from the value of agency and egalitarian relations under the constraints of mediated social relations. As we have seen, the moral reasons specified in this section are substantively egalitarian and sufficiently comparative due to this context-specificity. We might frame their motivation in the following way: in wide, societal relations, these reasons prescribe in terms of respect what is needed to give the equal moral status of individual agents, and their interests in valuable exercises of agency, an appropriate social reality. They are genuinely comparative reasons in favour of egalitarian *social* relations. This view then does specify substantive egalitarian requirements, which, furthermore, do not prescribe duties on a global scope. These only have force towards those with whom we share such social contexts. In this sense, the hitherto

established account is able to reject this worry, and the reasons defended in this section pass the egalitarian test.

I thus conclude that we have indeed identified another set of moral reasons for advancing our interests in egalitarian social relations. These are substantive egalitarian reasons that are genuine, comparative, scope-appropriate and thereby sufficiently independent from the universalistic requirements derived from our fundamental equal moral worth. These respect-based reasons featuring in wide societal relations, together with the reasons to promote social agency in close personal relationships form the foundation, I claim, for our claims to egalitarian social relations. The next and final section of this chapter will tie these strands of the argument together by discussing the nature, content, and normative weight of these claims.

4.4 The *pro tanto* claims to egalitarian social relations and their corresponding duties

Both sets of moral reasons that we have encountered so far support claims to advance our interests in egalitarian social relations. They are based on context-sensitive egalitarian considerations about the prudential value of social agency for individuals' well-being. The egalitarian reasons reflecting them, recommend actions either to directly and equally promote their capacities for social agency or to respectfully recognise their equal status as social agents. These are reasons that pass the *test from egalitarian substance and scope*.

Now, as the considerations and reasons differ between close, personal social relationships and those of wider, societal scope, our claims to egalitarian relations are also twofold. They prescribe different demands and duties to meet them, not least because agent-relative and agent-neutral moral reasons have distinct implications. Moreover, it is important to note that it follows from the account that we generally have these moral reasons to bring about egalitarian social relations if and when people are socially related. The considerations in favour of such egalitarian claims generally

apply: by and large, we have moral reasons to see to it that people's social standing is equalized, along the dimensions pointed out in this thesis. Yet despite this wide scope, these claims only have *some*, albeit non-trivial, weight. They are after all based on reasons that are also only of *pro tanto* nature. Other considerations can outweigh or exclude acting on them. Let us now take a closer look at these claims, what they mandate or license, and how these claims can be met.

Approaching these questions, an interesting implication appears out-front from the moral reasons at which we have arrived over the past two sections. At least one class of them seems to support claims that arguably are more akin to improvement claims than any claims that are thought to apply in a different, relational sense to the issues of superior power, authority, or regard. In other words, claims that authors working on social hierarchy typically label as claims against hierarchical relations of domination, esteem, and standing (see Anderson, 2012) or claims 'against inferiority' (see Kolodny, 2023). An often-assumed background idea is that the latter type of claims is in a sense special because these are normatively independent of or irreducible to concerns of material improvement in general, and to distributive concerns of justice in particular⁴⁵.

That said, the moral reasons for advancing egalitarian relations in close, personal relationships reflect, as we have seen, egalitarian considerations for improving people's position to exercise their agency socially. We morally value that (more) such egalitarian relations are obtained because this equally promotes individuals' overall level of valuable social agency. The consequentialist direction and agent-neutral force of these reasons is crucial, but arguably difficult to make sense of. After all, what action do these claims then demand of us? For this, I suggest understanding these improvement-like claims as a type of claim to a certain, better choice situation. Now, we can understand a choice situation to be improved,

⁴⁵ See the well-established debate between relational and distributive egalitarians about the correct view on egalitarian justice referenced in the Introduction (see Anderson, 2010).

“insofar as it enables one to pursue choice-dependent activities, which are possible or valuable only insofar as they flow from one’s own autonomous choices or judgments.” (Kolodny, 2023, 438)

In our case, we arguably cannot maximise individuals’ enjoyed level of social agency directly, since such activities are likewise choice-dependent and only possible insofar as they stem from individuals’ own commitments. So, we have reasons to promote egalitarian social relations that nurture individuals’ capacities for effective social agency, and which provide individuals with opportunities to exercise their agency socially. Egalitarian social relations facilitate and enable individuals equally to follow through on their action-reasons in pursuing their agential commitments. Thus, whereas our moral concern with egalitarian relations is indeed outcome-oriented in these social contexts, our claims hereof are best interpreted as claims to an improved egalitarian choice situation in which capacities are furthered and opportunities for social agency are available.

This, of course, is a controversial proposal with regard to the contemporary intra-egalitarian debate. Is it to concede that these claims to egalitarian social relations are merely a part of any distributive theory about what individuals are owed (as a matter of justice)? I do not believe that this straightforwardly follows. After all, we cannot, as a matter of feasibility, distribute such egalitarian choice situations, directly. Not least, since the required treatment and regard with equal social consideration cannot simply be administered. Concerns with egalitarian relations thus cannot feature in the *metric* of any egalitarian distributive theory, as the ‘stuff’ that should be distributed – which is typically captured in terms of resources, capabilities, opportunities for welfare, access to advantage, or formal rights and liberties (cf. Estlund, 2016, 23). Yet, to utilise a distinction introduced by Gheaus (2016), these concerns are possibly among the *distribuenda* of such a theory. The latter are the particular goods that a theory recommends distributing, of which the former are but the sum and function of their enjoyment (see Gheaus, 2016, 55). According to Gheaus, with this distinction we can conceptualise egalitarian relationships as part of the *distribuenda* of justice

and hence, some central concerns of relational egalitarians as distributive normative requirements. I do not take a stance on the last step of the argument, which seems to subsume all relational under distributive requirements of justice, but do agree that the claims to egalitarian social relationships might be cashed out in terms of *distribuenda* of a general egalitarian theory.

This idea then will naturally meet resistance from proponents of the relational egalitarian camp (cf. e.g. Axelsen & Bidadanure, 2019). As Gheaus herself writes, “[a] demand that relationships be (re)distributed can strike as artificial at best and absurd at most” (ibid., 56). This is why we must think of the *distribuendum* as a technical concept that allows us to make sense of an ideal of distribution. However, as it turns out, the argument in this chapter can give some support to this view, by painting a clearer picture of the underlying prudential value of egalitarian social relationships and our moral reasons to advance such relations: considerations about the personal, prudential value of social agency ground moral reasons for promoting egalitarian social relations in these contexts. And as our reasons for doing so are outcome-oriented, we care that people are in (or have opportunities to) an adequate and roughly equal position to exercise their agency effectively. That is, that they enjoy robust egalitarian social relationships. While this moves claims of egalitarian social relationships closer to other egalitarian claims of improvements, more needs to be said about the duties that follow from these claims before we can make any conclusive judgment about this matter. For now, I merely wanted to point to one interesting feature of the account that is developed here.

The second type of claims to egalitarian relations supported by these moral reasons, are claims directed on others to respect us as social agents of an equal status and to regulate their treatment by constraints derived from that norm. This follows from the adopted view on recognition respect towards individuals’ statuses that is at the basis of these claims (cf. Dillon, 2022). Failing to convey such respect wrongs individuals and leaves them comparatively worse off. Not recognising other status-holders equally in our treatment (and sometimes regard), is to give less weight to other

individuals' interests in being effective social agents in our decisions. When some individuals are treated with less and/or inadequate social consideration because of the status they have been ascribed, it is similarly likely to negatively affect their choice situation, by reducing or removing options or liberties that they as agents have equal interests in. Likewise, when we recognise some agent's status as carrying special normative weight and reflect this in our treatment of them, then we fail to convey appropriate egalitarian respect. Those others have a complaint towards us, when we treat some agents, as and because of their status, with more factual authority and their projects as more worthy of social esteem. This is a failure of respecting agents equally, which is expressed in the unequal social consideration with which some are treated.

These agency respect-based claims are harder to make sense of in a distributive fashion. It is not *eo ipso* clear whether and how being equally recognised as a social agent (through having one's status equally respected) can figure in a distributive calculus. As *per* its purely deontological nature, such a claim is better thought of as acting as a constraint on our conduct. As duty bearers, we owe it to others equally that we recognise them as agents and take their status as setting a constraint on our practical deliberations about how to permissibly act towards them when we seek to advance our or others' interests. In following this norm of recognition respect, we effectively treat others as having equal social status.

Reversely, these two types of claims provide two different negative formulations of what we ought to take issue with in inequalitarian social relationships. These are morally problematic, according to the first type of claims, because they leave us in a worse choice situation than we have a claim to be (one in which we are treated with adequate and roughly equal levels of authority and regard). And inequalitarian social relations are morally problematic, according to the second type, because an unequal social status conveys disrespect to us as social agents, which is, a failure to treat us with equal social consideration because of the status that we are assigned or attributed. In both close, personal relationships and wide, societal relations our egalitarian claims identify morally

objectionable features, albeit on somewhat different grounds, that they recommend overcoming, on a *pro tanto* basis.

That these claims entail substantive duties but have only *pro tanto* weight, leads us, lastly, to the tasks of specifying their relationship to duty bearers on the one hand, and how other rival, non- or anti-egalitarian considerations bear on their all-things-considered validity on the other. For the former, it is helpful to consult the philosophical literature on claim-*rights* here, where the relationship between claims and duties has attracted substantial discussion.

In general, the formal nature of this relationship can be formulated as follows: “A has a claim that B φ if and only if B has a duty to A to φ ” (Wenar, 2023). A valid claim thus presupposes a corresponding duty on another agent. In that sense, the duty-bearer’s duty is “directed at” or “owed to” the right-holder (ibid.). Moreover, a claim-right can correspond to duties in more than one agent. Transferred to our case of claims to egalitarian relations, this is particularly salient. In close, personal relationships, anyone sharing the relationship bears the duty to adhere to the egalitarian claims of all others. In wide, societal relations, which are in some way mediated, the relevant norm applies not only horizontally, between e.g. citizens, but includes in the potential duty bearers all those who exert effective control over the mediating social institutions. Predominantly, these are or can be directed by institutions of the state. Who we have reason to charge with these duties specifically, will, again, turn on moral and non-moral considerations, both about the stringency of these claims and the desirability to attribute them to individual persons or social institutions. A question to which we will return in the subsequent chapters when discussing considerations contesting the stringency of our claims to egalitarian social relations.

Such right claims are further valid insofar as they substantiate the grounds of the corresponding duties. Typically, but not exclusively⁴⁶, by identifying a morally relevant interest. Various accounts

⁴⁶ Cf. ‘will’ or ‘choice’ theories (e.g. Hart, 1982) compared to ‘interest’ (e.g. Raz, 1986) theories of rights.

of this functional relationship between interests, claims, and duties exist in the literature (see Rainbolt, 2006). The argument fleshed so far out has some obvious theoretical debt to theories emphasising the role of interests in explaining and establishing duties. I have, after all, proceeded from identifying some prudential interests to formulating moral considerations, resulting in claims to secure these morally significant interests. One such view that seems particularly suited to our endeavour, is Scanlon's (1998/2008) contractualist interpretation of this relationship. On his view, this is explained through two claims:

“The first is the claim that certain interests are of great importance. The second is a claim that duties imposing limits on the discretion of individuals or institutional agents to act in certain ways are necessary to protect these interests, and that there are such constraints which are feasible—that is to say, which provide this protection an acceptable cost to other interests.” (Scanlon, 2008, 70)

This provides, I believe, a solid understanding of the claims and corresponding duties that we are interested in. This theory of the relationship conditions duties on considerations from feasibility and reasonableness (or, reasonably costly necessity) that fit well into the overall picture of *pro tanto* moral reasons supporting egalitarian claims. There is also another reason why this provides a useful framework: claims arguably vary in regard to how specific they are about corresponding duties. As Scanlon further points out, some, what he calls ‘defined’ rights, claims identify duties explicitly and clearly, whereas others are ‘abstract’ rights claims, which “merely identify the interests at stake and assert that there is a need for duties to protect them and that *some* duties of this sort can and should be found which have a tolerable cost in other terms” (ibid., 70). A broadly contractualist framework such as Scanlon's can coherently account for both types of claims.

Following this distinction, I propose to think of claims to egalitarian social relations as abstract rights claims. Claims, that identify an important moral interest – in being situated in egalitarian social relations – and assert that some duties for protecting this interest can be found that are of reasonable cost to others. The unspecified nature of these claims allows for a flexible, broad and also context-sensitive view of both the duty bearers and their individual duties to meet them. This

view does not presuppose that duties necessarily need to be enshrined in law to be valid for us and accepts that these claims and duties sometimes function as moral constraints on our individual conduct. Furthermore, it turns the question of when we have such justified claims and some corresponding duties, into a discussion about both moral and empirical considerations⁴⁷. Not only is it possible that other values or interests weigh against these claims, thereby adding nuance to their all-things-considered moral standing, but the possibility of fulfilling these duties also turns on empirical features about the social contexts in question. On that basis, we can understand the question of outweighing or otherwise rival reasons to our claims to egalitarian relations as a function of both their reasonableness and feasibility. This accommodates well, I think, the overall features of the account of *pro tanto* claims to egalitarian social relations that was developed over the past three sections of this chapter.

To know, then, whether, in a given social context, we have a conclusive or all things considered justified stringent claim on others to egalitarian social relations, we need to balance the burdens we face in a worse choice situation or when receiving less or no respect for our social status, on the one hand, against the burdens that others would have to bear for them to make our choice situation better or respect our particular social statuses equally, on the other (cf. Kolodny, 2023, 70). For that, we need to assess the balance of moral reasons and take those considerations into account that speak, in one way or another, against the desirability or feasibility of enforcing these egalitarian claims.

With this in mind, we can turn in the next chapter to the analysis and evaluation of such potentially valid, excluding or outweighing, considerations against our egalitarian reasons supporting *pro tanto* valid claims to an egalitarian social standing.

⁴⁷ By that, it arguably also points in the direction of the conditions under which we can possibly take agents to waive or even forfeit their claims to an egalitarian standing, i.e. when certain of their actions render realising such claims unreasonable or impracticable (see also Bengtson, 2024; Schmidt, 2022).

CHAPTER 5.

CONTESTING CLAIMS TO EGALITARIAN SOCIAL RELATIONS

Over the course of the past chapters, we have covered extensive normative territory. What we have arrived at, can be described as a moral presumption in favour of the validity of claims to egalitarian social relations. Having found the value of these social relations residing in people's interests in exercising their social agency, in Chapter 3, and having established that we have weighty egalitarian moral reasons to advance those interests, in Chapter 4, I shall now engage with considerations and moral reasons that prescribe the opposite – namely, that inegalitarian social relations are, at least sometimes, morally permitted or tolerable. As I have argued in the prior chapter, our claims to egalitarian social relations are of *pro tanto* nature. This allows for valid reasons based on rival considerations that speak against the justification of such claims. Whether we have all-things-considered reasons to bring about egalitarian social relations thus depends on whether these considerations are substantive enough to countervail or thwart our egalitarian claims. Examining the normative force and weight of these antagonizing considerations and moral reasons is the subject of this chapter. This shall eventually yield us a comprehensive and well-justified account of the standing of claims to egalitarian social relations.

The aim of this chapter is therefore to show, on a *general* level, how various considerations support competing reasons to our reasons for advancing our interests in egalitarian relations. I shall thus not give an account of whether some specific inegalitarian relations in certain social contexts – e.g. hierarchies in the workplace or between citizens – are justified but defend a view about how we should consider the nature and stringency of these competing reasons against our egalitarian claims on a more abstract level. That said, I will jump between different layers of analysis in this chapter, looking for insights in specific instances and debates about considerations against social equality to reach such abstract and general judgement.

Now, conflicts of reasons, as Adams (2021) writes, “are resolved through various kinds of defeat” (Adams, 2021, 235). The relevant conflicts in our case are, so I shall argue, of one of two types. Either our reasons for advancing egalitarian relations are outweighed or they are ‘overridden’. What I mean by the latter, is, in a general sense, that they are excluded by a rival, exclusionary reason (cf. Raz, 1999). Reasons outweigh if they are based on considerations that can, roughly, be measured against other, contrasting considerations and, on the balance of reasons, prevail. If they cannot be balanced against other considerations, but trump those altogether, then they are overriding or exclusionary reasons instead. If rival reasons exclude our egalitarian reasons or outweigh them, I treat them as decisive against our claims to egalitarian relations. This allows us to determine the all-things-considered standing of our egalitarian claims.

Note, however, that there is a relevant asymmetry between those reasons. Since I have shown that there is a weighty case in favour of egalitarian social relations, rival or competing reasons need to respond to the fact that permitting inequalitarian social relations itself represents a *pro tanto* wrong. Thus, in both instances, these reasons serve as a special justification for a *pro tanto* wrong to be permissible (cf. Kushner, 2019, 461). The burden of proof, so to say, lies therefore on anyone relying on such reasons to show that they are indeed of sufficient weight or exclusionary normative force. Therefore, taking this asymmetry between reasons against and in favour of egalitarian social relations as a given, I shall consider these reasons with regard to how plausibly they provide such special, decisive justification.

The plan for this chapter is thus to examine and evaluate considerations that support reasons that justify permitting social hierarchies. The rival reasons that I consider here stem from considerations about merit, paternalism, and (primarily, efficiency-based) costs. The reason for specifically singling out these is that I consider them both prominent and commonplace in our thinking as well as potentially decisive against advancing egalitarian social relations. In doing so, I continue to make use of the frameworks established in earlier chapters. To recall, we are operating with a non-

moralised understanding of (egalitarian) social relations, instances of which we assess from an (agency-based) evaluative view and the distinct normative egalitarian claims that I have argued for (cf. Chapters 1–4).

As I have suggested, moral reasons for our egalitarian claims derive their normative standing from reflections about their reasonableness or feasibility. Accordingly, I will analyse these considerations of merit, paternalism, and costs from this point of view. The method of analysis that I am employing for this discussion follows a certain pattern: for each of these types of considerations, I first discuss their motivation, then attempt to sketch their most charitable interpretation, before I analyse the nature of the reasons they support. Once I have established whether these reasons potentially outweigh or exclude other reasons, I assess their weight against the reasons for advancing egalitarian social relations that we have found in Chapter 4. This corresponds to sections 5.1–5.3. Lastly, in section 5.4. I bring the insights from these sections together, draw a conclusion about these threats to egalitarian claims, and show what this implies for our evaluation and treatment of different kinds of social hierarchy.

5.1 Considerations of merit

One, natural contender for considerations against establishing egalitarian social relations comes from the notion of merit. In its simplest form, such considerations express the idea that at least sometimes, it is justified to have inequalitarian social relations between individuals if, and only if, the superior social standing of some over others is merited.

Abstractly speaking, the concept of “[m]erit” connotes worth, quality, virtue, excellence, and more” (Mulligan, 2023). The relationship between merit and what having it implies, is, however, an ambiguous one. As Sen (2000) succinctly puts it, “[t]he idea of meritocracy may have many virtues, but clarity is not one of them (Sen, 2000, 5). Thus, while it is not uncontroversial in the literature what exactly the specific quality is, it is generally thought that those who possess it should carry

some sort of higher influence in society. This is the idea of meritocracy. Beyond that, there is one point to clarify. Merit, unlike the concept of desert, which is in its conceptual vicinity, is a contextual phenomenon. It only exists relative to a certain context. In that sense, it is distinct from considerations of desert that are pre-institutional in nature (albeit merit might be the basis for desert, see Mulligan, 2018).

Considerations of merit reflect the verdict that, on grounds of having some such virtue, some occupy a special normative place compared to others. Potential contenders for this type of merit are manifold. Merit can be thought to be an innate, learned or otherwise achieved quality. For an example of such consideration that is suited to our purpose, consider the case of medical doctor's expertise: doctors usually are attributed higher authority than non-doctors in social contexts where their expertise matters. Their expert medical skills merit higher consideration. Presumably, because this has instrumental or non-instrumental value. And thus, in circumstances of medical emergencies, the doctor calls the shots and others generally obey their directives. Another common example is athletes who are held in high esteem because of their accomplishments. An athlete who, for example, wins the gold medal in a certain competition will attract higher regard than the second-placed, who will be held in higher regard than the third-placed, and so forth. Through merit based on sport achievements, a hierarchy of esteem is established. And so, in both examples, individuals receive unequal social consideration. In effect, considerations from merit such as these, support moral reasons for permitting inequalitarian social relationships in at least some social contexts where merit applies.

Merit is thus a commonsensical justification for stratified social relations. Someone defending a merit view will argue that such skill- and esteem-based merit is not only commonly accepted but also innocuous and hardly inimical to egalitarian social relations. When we consider these considerations in social contexts of close, personal relationships, merited inequalities of social consideration seemingly pose no threat to people's interests in exercising their agency. This is

because such merit has, what Kolodny (2023) describes as, context- and content-limitation (Kolodny, 2023, 99): the disparities in *de facto* authority and social esteem are limited to a specific context and do not spill over into others, and such inequalities are justified by the *function* of the social context in question (that is, their contribution to value in these social relations). So can doctors tell others what to do only in contexts where we rely on their authority to decide so, e.g. when working with medical and non-medical staff in a hospital, but should not have the same higher authority over family matters. And sports-based achievement is a reason to esteem some higher than others, but in their capacity as and function of sportspersons only. Thus, some inequalities can be justified on special grounds of merit because these considerations are limited to small-scale social relationships. True, a proponent of this view will admit, we will end up with some inequalitarian social relationships, but the few social contexts where this applies do not threaten individuals' overall interests in effective social agency. I take this to be a main motivation in favour of merit-based considerations against establishing egalitarian social relations.

Now, such considerations of merit also have clear normative implications. By their nature, I suggest, they do not weigh against other considerations, but, if valid, trump them. A doctor's skill-based authority is not a consideration that weighs against our egalitarian interests, I believe, but one that simply overrides or excludes them. The weight and force of these considerations are in a sense incommensurable (yet, again, only where merit is, for whichever reason, justified and conducive to the function of relationships). As such, the reasons or special justification of merit rather cancel out competing moral reasons. Be our claims based on outcome reasons or reasons of respect; these competing reasons trump them. There is a straightforward case then, for seeing valid merit-based hierarchies in some social contexts as all-things-considered justified. It is as such that we should treat them when evaluating their alleged plausibility vis-à-vis our claims to egalitarian social relations.

So, should we accept that merit-based considerations can generally trump our moral reasons for advancing our interests in egalitarian social relations, as the *prima facie* account above claims? I caution against simply accepting that conclusion. To see why, we should move our focus away from closer, personal to wide, societal relations. In such social contexts, our relations are mediated by social institutions, a fact that is expressed in the status we are ascribed or attributed through e.g. formal law or informal social norms. Are there considerations of merit that could apply, for example, in the context of political relations between citizens? I doubt that there are. Superior competence in political matters arguably cannot, for example, establish a higher status for some over others. Those skilled in or belonging to the professional caste of public administration should not get more say or treated with higher authority in how to shape the domestic polity. Our egalitarian reasons of respect for social agents strongly prescribe that as political citizens we are treated the same, as equal social agents. Any merited differences in authority on grounds of merited skill appear to be inadequate for permitting superior status.

For a similar case, let's ponder a scenario in which professional politicians, and only those politicians, are regarded with high esteem in political society (a rather hard case to imagine, I am aware). No other venue allows for attracting high admiration; opportunities for social esteem are crowded out by being a politician only. Does that give us a reason for thinking that a person becoming a professional politician should occupy a higher place, because of their esteem-based merit? It strikes me as unconvincing that such a social hierarchy based on esteem and justified by merit is acceptable when no other opportunity for gaining social consideration exists. This leaves individuals in an inadequate position to pursue their agential interests (cf. Dalton, 2017; Porro, 2021). So, on the contrary, it turns out in both these cases that considerations of merit cannot establish permissible superior authority or regard, despite being limited in content and context. These considerations simply are insufficient and lack the force necessary to exclude our interests in being treated and regarded as equal social agents.

Furthermore, there is another reason that speaks against the weight of merit considerations in wide, societal relations. Meritocratic claims “tend to traffic in ideas about unequal human worth” (Satz & White, 2024; cf. also Sandel, 2020). There is a symbolic or expressive dimension to permitting hierarchies based on merit. Once we allow for superior status on grounds of merit, we risk signalling something morally significant. Namely, that some individuals’ interests count more than others in our society. This affirmation of moral inequality that is socially expressed in hierarchies of esteem thus runs counter not only to our interests in equal social but also equal moral agency.

While the contexts of status-based societal relations show more clearly the limitations of such considerations of merit, a similar case can be made for close, personal relationships as well. Going back to the example of doctors and medal-winning athletes. Things are quite different there once we imagine that only doctors have absolute authority over others, i.e., that nurses and other medical personnel are treated and regarded with a complete lack of factual authority. There are clear limits for merited inequalities once they threaten the basic standing of others in one’s social context. Likewise, in a competition where only gold-medal winners are held in high regard and others receive none whatsoever, the *prima facie* justified hierarchy of merited esteem suddenly seems more conspicuous. Having the value of social agency in mind, this now does appear to be threatening to our overall fundamental interests in egalitarian social relations. I think this points to the specific problem of considerations of merit: while they have some intuitive *gravitas* in the context of our comparative interests in enjoying roughly equal levels of social agency, once we consider them as threatening to our non-comparative interests in receiving an adequate or decent level of social consideration, they are rendered impotent. This is consistent with the view on the nature of egalitarian social relations that I have established in prior chapters. As these have comparative and non-comparative components, we can say that considerations of merit only have traction regarding our relative social standing and only when the latter, non-comparative requirement is secured. Our

expectations for considerations of merit should thus clearly be more curtailed than what is, admittedly, often assumed.

This shows, I believe, that considerations of merit support reasons for a special justification of inegalitarian social relations only at first glance. Rather, they are merely valid in social contexts where individuals already enjoy a decent level of social agency, where context- and content-limited considerations of merit exist, and only where they are derived by the function of the relationship in question. And, as we have seen, this is much more plausible and easier to come by in close, personal relationships than in wide, societal relations. On that account, we can conclude that considerations of merit only apply in a limited form and scope. While there are some instances of social relations where such considerations are decisive against claims to enjoying egalitarian social relations, these appear only in small-scale, few-in-number social contexts. Moreover, they are only valid if and when a decent level of social consideration for every agent is secured. Our conclusive verdict about considerations from merit should thus be that they are not generally capable of cancelling our *pro tanto* claims to egalitarian social relations. In other words, it is not reasonable to permit our egalitarian reasons to be trumped by considerations of merit.

5.2 Considerations of paternalism

Another type of considerations that calls the reasonableness of claims to egalitarian social relations into question, stems from a concern with what is usually discussed under the label of paternalism. The charge that reasons supported by those considerations bring forward is that advancing our interests in egalitarian social relations, either by promoting individuals' social agency equally or by paying egalitarian respect to social agents' status, involves or requires undesirable paternalistic actions. These considerations thus appear to deny, in a qualified sense, what I have shown in Chapter 4 to be generally true: that advancing our interests in egalitarian social relations does not fundamentally conflict with individuals' other morally significant interests. They represent a special

class of competing considerations to this thesis as they do not contest our egalitarian interests as such, but maintain that any attempts to realise them require wrongful paternalistic interventions. And by that, they would infringe on another kind of our moral interests.

The relevant interests here, naturally, are those that we usually take to give rise to negative individual rights against interference by individuals or the state. Now, introducing and debating paternalism as a consideration against our claims to egalitarian relations may strike some as odd. After all, the much-related project of relational egalitarianism has since its inception seen an anti-paternalistic concern as one of its main driving motivations. Anderson, in her seminal (1999) article, takes explicit issue with paternalistic state action because, through it, the state expresses that there is a hierarchy between its subjects. This is a problem, for we all are, presumably, our moral equals and thus such a situation, that would come to terms under a fully luck egalitarian state, she suggests, is morally objectionable (cf. Anderson, 1999, 289–301). More recently, however, Højlund (2022) has shown in her comprehensive argument on relational egalitarianism and paternalism, that a principled stance of rejecting paternalism on relational egalitarian grounds is unstable at best. At least sometimes, acting paternalistically is permitted or can even be required by the value of relational equality (but see Bengtson, 2023b). Neither of the typically cited relational concerns from stigmatisation, doxastic wronging, or expressing unequal weight to others' interests can establish that paternalism is always prohibited, Højlund claims. Rather, adopting paternalistic policies or acting paternalistically as individuals sometimes (uniquely) helps combat relational inequalities. Thus, on Højlund's view, paternalism is sometimes *pro tanto* permissible or even required to achieve relational equality (see Højlund, 2022, 29).

We should, I think, treat the relevant concerns about paternalism for us here against this theoretical and normative background. They follow a general presumption that paternalism is *prima facie* wrong, but it requires further argument to show that it is all-things-considered morally prohibited to act on paternalistic reasons in a concrete case and, furthermore, that enforcing our claims to egalitarian

relations necessarily involves such objectionable paternalism there. With that, we can engage with those considerations that deny that advancing our interests in egalitarian social relations can be achieved without impermissible paternalism.

For this, let me give some clarificatory remarks on my understanding of the concept of paternalism first. Following Dworkin (1972/2020) I assume that paternalistic interventions can be defined in non-moralised terms as a) an agent's interference with the liberty or autonomy of another, that is b) done without the latter's consent, and c) only so because the former believes that doing so improves the latter's welfare or in some way promotes their interests (see Dworkin, 2020). Among the basic conceptual distinctions, the following are relevant for us⁴⁸: paternalistic interventions can be broad and narrow as well as weak or strong. Narrow paternalism is only concerned with the state and its legal coercion, broad paternalism on the other hand, addresses any paternalistic interference by the state, social institutions, or individuals. A concern with interventions for advancing egalitarian social relations clearly lends itself towards a broad view. Paternalistic interference can stem from any such agents and institutions. Furthermore, weak paternalism accepts interferences with the means that individuals choose to pursue their ends, but not with their ends themselves. Such a concern arises, for example, when the means chosen would defeat the intended ends. Strong paternalism accepts that individuals sometimes set themselves misbegotten or bad ends, too, and on that basis permits interferences with people's attempts to achieve these ends (see *ibid.*). Again, this is significant for our discussion insofar as we are and should be concerned with individuals who set themselves ends that outwardly contradict having egalitarian social relations, or who take up means that would render bringing them about unlikely.

⁴⁸ In addition to those, paternalism can be hard or soft, concerning the relevance of interferences with actions being undertaken voluntarily and knowledgeably, and pure or impure, concerning whether the class being protected by paternalistic actions is identical with the class being interfered with. These, albeit important, aspects are excluded from the discussion above as their relevance is, I believe, not decisive for the argument in this section.

On grounds of that, what is the case for considerations of paternalism against advancing claims to egalitarian relations? As discussed above, we can start with the general presumption that paternalism, of any flavour, is *prima facie* wrong. The burden of proof lies with the proponent of intended paternalistic actions to show that in a specific case, it is indeed all-things-considered permitted to intervene in people's ends or means to promote a particular good. The issue that the objector in our case has in mind, is, as argued above, that this cannot be established. What they may say is the following: it does not seem reasonable to ask of individuals that they accept being interfered with in their personal affairs, on grounds of refashioning these relationships into more egalitarian ones. Likewise, incentivising or 'nudging' people to relate as equals in societal affairs is controversial and demanding. The good of egalitarian relations and the value of social agency cannot demonstrate that the justificatory threshold for permissible paternalism is met. And as there are very likely situations where meeting claims to egalitarian social relations cannot but require paternalistic interferences – this much seems to follow from their nature and underlying value as I have presented them – there are valid considerations from paternalism against advancing those claims. All of this appears against the background of recognising that egalitarian relations have significant moral worth. But there seems to be, at the very least, room for reasonable disagreement about whether these claims can be advanced in paternalistically permissible ways.

Now, reasonable disagreement might be overcome. We can find ways or procedures to duly settle them⁴⁹. But I believe that there is an even stronger reason acting in the background of these concerns with paternalism: to interfere with individuals paternalistically is to interfere with their agency. Yet, a moral concern with the exercise agency is at the very core of the account presented in this thesis. The non-instrumental value of exercising agency socially does much of the argumentative work in establishing the desirability of egalitarian relations in the first place. But to accept advancing egalitarian relations, which we do to promote or honour social agency, in ways

⁴⁹ For such a theory of disagreement resolution see e.g. McMahon (2009), Ch. 4.

that neglect individuals as agents gives the impression of being outright morally tainted. Paternalistic interventions that would undermine one's exercise of agency seem to essentially contradict the view and value defended here! I take this to be a stronger and particularly relevant motivation behind concerns with paternalism against realising claims to egalitarian social relations.

Before we engage with this thesis, note that such considerations from paternalism are, however strong we may think them, of a different nature than those of merit. The notion of a threshold noted above is indicative here. Such considerations do not exclude the reasons for our egalitarian claims⁵⁰, rather, paternalistic considerations weigh against them. And as such, it depends on whether the justificatory burden can be met, to show whether they are all-things-considered decisive in outweighing advancing our claims to egalitarian relations in different social contexts. With this in mind, let us examine the plausibility of these competing considerations, by looking at what they imply in terms of the conceptual distinctions introduced before.

First and foremost, the objection clearly favours understanding paternalistic interferences in a broad sense. It is not just state coercion that paternalistically interferes with our exercises of agency, but also social institutions and individuals. Considerations of paternalism should be understood to give rise to moral reasons against meeting claims to egalitarian social relations in this wide sense. Furthermore, these considerations strictly speak against the validity of any strong paternalism. Interfering with the ends of individuals while having the implicit aim of promoting their agency situations cannot stand. As such, people committing to strongly anti-social projects or relationships – consider the afore-mentioned hermit in earlier chapters of this thesis – should not be paternalistically interfered with. We should not try and promote their interests in egalitarian relations by attempting to paternalistically manipulate their agential end-setting. On the contrary, a disposition to acting non-paternalistically towards others' agential pursuits is for that reason very

⁵⁰ The reference to 'our' is crucial here. Paternalism may very well give us exclusionary reasons in other contexts and against other considerations.

much part and parcel of having egalitarian social relations in the first place. It is part of what it takes to have good egalitarian relationships and part of what is required to recognise and respect others as equal social agents. This is, I think, a plausible implication that we should accept.

That said, this leaves room for valid weak paternalistic interferences, i.e. interferences with the means that people take up in pursuing their chosen ends. The anti-egalitarian reasons seem much weaker when considered against weakly paternalistic egalitarian measures. It is after all a main normative aspect of egalitarian relations that they nurture individuals' capacities for pursuing social projects and relationships. We should be concerned with the means they take up in, e.g. adopting a social role, as only when they are not misguided about them, can the instrumental and non-instrumental value of exercising agency be realised. From that perspective, acting paternalistically in this sense in our close, personal and wider, societal relations seems more acceptable. In the relationships with our dear and near, we are (usually) aware of their commitments and might justifiably act in ways that better realise their ends. Any such interventions can even be welcomed by others or *feel* not paternalistic at all, whether they are or not. And in wider relations, some interventions in the choice structure that aim to facilitate individuals to navigate the social environment and effectively commit to their projects and relationships seem innocuous, too.

Such means-paternalism needs to be considered relative to contexts, however. It matters for its permissibility, whether this is done by individuals, social institutions, or the state. Even though such interferences seem generally much more acceptable, there is an apparent gap between what individuals do in their relationships and what the state does by engaging in the sort of nudging typically advised by libertarian paternalist recommendations (see Thaler & Sunstein, 2003). We should thus consider the weight of paternalism considerations case by case.

In the individual case, people are arguably under a general duty of non-paternalism about the ends that others choose. An assertion that is affirmed by our claims of egalitarian social relations in the first place. Considerations of strong paternalism weigh against meeting these claims by means of

end-manipulation. However, considerations of weak paternalism are of lesser force. Our morally weighty interests in exercising agency socially do outweigh, I want to argue, general considerations against weak paternalism in social contexts of close, personal relationships. As such, we can meet claims to egalitarian social relations by interfering with the means that our closely related take up for their commitments⁵¹.

In the case of wider, societal relations, things are in a sense different, albeit the same reasoning applies. Strong paternalism remains objectionable, as shown above, while weak paternalism is, in principle, permissible as considerations derived from it can be outweighed. However, the significant asymmetry between the state and the individual – in terms of the quality and vastness of the power and authority wielded – calls for special justification and thus for a higher threshold for those considerations of weak paternalism to be outweighed. I think, this gives us reason to be suspicious about accepting even weak paternalistic interferences from the state, even when they, transparently, aim to enable us to follow through on our action-reasons. There is a high threshold to be met for accepting weak paternalism from the perspective of our agency interests. As such, it seems that considerations from weak paternalism can outweigh meeting the claims of egalitarian relations by the state.

There is, I believe, another reason and explanation though, for why we should indeed tolerate some, few weakly paternalistic interventions issued by the state. A third type of interferences, namely, comes from social institutions, both formal and informal. So do, for example, informal social norms in their functions of maintaining social status ascriptions. As I have argued in Chapter 4, such systems of social norms that attribute status to individuals on a, morally, arbitrary basis are to the detriment of egalitarian relations. We do have claims to egalitarian recognition respect for our statuses as social agents against such norms. In that sense, individuals' agency is already manifoldly interfered with, and often in objectionable ways. The state, on the other hand, is in a

⁵¹ But see Bengtson & Midtgaard (in press) for an objection to this conclusion.

unique position to address these shortcomings and can, with limits, counteract them (cf. Sunstein, 1995). For that reason, I argue that the state's mandate here permits some paternalistic interferences that seek to enforce our egalitarian claims against widespread social norms that pose a threat to them. As we find such informal social institutions lacking, from the perspective of our claims to egalitarian relations, there are then further reasons to dismiss some considerations about weak paternalism. In this sense, the threshold for outweighing those considerations can be met by state intervention.

However, the superior position of the state is arguably not exhausted by this discussion. There is a further issue of whether such paternalistic interferences of states, such exercises of 'norm management' (Sunstein, 1995), are legitimate in the first place. This turns on the question of whether weak state paternalism is unduly comprehensive and perfectionist – whether the state's interference with individuals for the sake of enforcing claims to egalitarian social relations is unjustified because it attempts to implement a potentially, controversial, moral and social ideal through relying on perfectionist judgments. This is a question about the justified mandate of the state, which brings us into the territory of debates about (liberal) perfectionism. Whether a just and legitimate, state is permitted to enforce our egalitarian claims by way of weakly paternalistic interferences requires further discussion.

Thus, I submit that the reasoning above amounts to only a limited defence of weak state paternalism. Contrary to close, personal relationships where, I claim, we have more confidence that weakly paternalistic interferences are all-things-considered justified, the case for societal and political relations involving the state, turns out to be more complex. Whether, on the balance of reasons, considerations from weak paternalism are outweighed by our claims to egalitarian social relations requires further argument. Namely, one providing a substantive justification against charges of (undue) perfectionism. So, I conclude, for now, that considerations from paternalism indeed prove to be potentially threatening our egalitarian claims and can therefore not be dismissed.

The case about considerations from paternalism is thus not yet conclusive. For that reason, I shall take up this matter again in Chapter 6 and subject it to a comprehensive evaluation from the perspective of liberal (anti-) perfectionism there.

Before doing so though, let us continue by taking a close look at another set of potentially decisive, anti-egalitarian considerations. These last reason supporting considerations, which I subject to scrutiny in this chapter, share a thing in common – a respective and specific concern with costs.

5.3 Considerations of costs: efficiency, coordination, and individual burdens

A discussion of costs-based reasons best starts with an examination of considerations about the value of efficiency. Since it is this notion that is commonly invoked when the costs of egalitarian implementations are concerned. The concept of efficiency in its narrow sense in which we are interested here, describes the value of producing a desired effect by using precisely the desired number of resources necessary. Efficiency is, in that sense, more targeted than the related concept of effectiveness (see Alexander, 2009). A prominent way to construe that value is, for example, in terms of Pareto-optimality, which is an efficiency property of situations in which there are no longer any ways left to make one individual better off without making another worse off. In this understanding, we find considerations of efficiency in both economics (see e.g. Coase, 1937) and normative theory, for example in Rawls's (1971) well-known discussion of the relevance of efficiency with regard to principles of justice (cf. Inoue, 2024).

The idea of efficiency is of interest to us for many societal and economic processes and procedures. We value it when public administration provides services efficiently, and when goods in the economy are likewise produced efficiently. I take it for granted that efficiency thus understood has at least some relevant normative value. This does not necessarily imply that its value is intrinsic, however. It is sufficient to grant that efficiency is instrumentally valuable in producing desirable effects. Efficiency is then, as Motchoulski (2024) puts it, “at least of derivative value by virtue of

being a source of greater individual well-being” (Motchoulski, 2024, 717), and as such, relevant for moral and political argument. We have thus reason to think that considerations from efficiency can in some ways be relevant for the proposed claims to egalitarian relations as well.

Now, debates about equality and efficiency are, of course, well-established. It is (or maybe, has been) commonplace in both commonsense thinking and philosophical reasoning that efficiency *always* clashes with the value of equality. This point has been levelled as a strong claim against egalitarian theories in many ways. It is for example said on such an account that striving for equality will lead to a lack of incentives and thus to a trade-off with efficiency (see Nozick, 1974). Or, that it will necessarily involve sacrificing some gains in overall well-being for more equal levels of it (as in Utilitarian theory, see e.g. Marseille & Kahn, 2019). The familiar levelling-down objection that has specifically been brought up against distributive egalitarians, can also be understood as motivated by some considerations of efficiency (cf. Parfit, 1997). This has generated a great many arguments about the value and relationship between efficiency and equality and has seen many egalitarians denying that the strong claim is true. Especially more recently, some have argued that a nuanced and contextual view is more appropriate. Satz & White (2024), for example, assert that

“[r]ather than assuming that measures to reduce inequalities always entail a cost in terms of efficiency, therefore, we should adopt a much more nuanced perspective in which we consider on a case-by-case basis the possible benefits, as well as possible costs, to efficiency objectives of such measures.” (Satz & White, 2024, 9)

Taking all this into account, we should expect that claims to egalitarian social relations face some weighty anti-egalitarian considerations from efficiency, albeit their validity will depend on contextual features. With this, we can take a closer look at how efficiency constrains or acts against our moral claims to egalitarian relations.

A good point of departure for this is to consider a specific instance of a social context regarding which a substantial debate about efficiency-based considerations against egalitarian claims has burgeoned over the past decade in the scholarly literature – the workplace. In this debate about

workplace relations, several relational egalitarians have argued that we have claims to more equality. Substantive arguments⁵² range from those straightforwardly advocating for more democratic decision-making in the firm (see Anderson, 2017) to those conceding that hierarchies in the workplace are, at least, likely morally deficient (see Kolodny, 2023). As in the case of distributive equality, social egalitarians and those adjacent, have been met with resistance from those citing efficiency-based considerations. This is what makes this debate a natural starting point for a discussion of considerations from efficiency vis-à-vis the value of social equality.

In his recent (2024) article, Motchoulski provides a helpful review of the structure of these arguments. In his view, the crucial considerations of efficiency are those that provide reasons even for egalitarians to tolerate hierarchies in the workplace. These considerations of toleration concern states of affairs which we deem morally deficient in one regard but nevertheless have reason not to intrusively interfere with (Motchoulski, 2024, 716). Their ground in efficiency can essentially be explained by the ideas of lowered transaction costs and minimised opportunity costs.

In economic terms, the former are costs that are incurred whenever an economic transaction with another agent is made and a contractual relationship is set up. As entering these relationships in the market is costly – planning, devising, and executing economic processes is time- and resource-intensive – the hierarchical firm emerges, in Coase's (1937) seminal analysis of workplace organisation, as a solution to lower these costs of transaction. Or, in other words, we accept the authority of the hierarchical firm as a substitute for contractual relationships on grounds of efficiency. We forego some freedom and equality in the market for some economic gains such as increased productivity. Hierarchies achieve coordination and the goods derived from it more efficiently. Opportunity costs, on the other hand, are the benefits foregone and the costs acquired by deciding on one economic alternative instead of another. As we always have to make a considered judgment about which of the available options to pursue – be it in public policy,

⁵² For an overview of this debate, see Jonker & Rozeboom (2023).

entrepreneurial or individual circumstances – opportunity costs are constantly accrued. Considerations from efficiency here mean choosing an option that minimises these costs and tells us to weigh whether potential gains are justified by the alternatives foregone. Together, these ideas provide the ground for the trade-off argument between equality and efficiency, which sees most discussion these days in debates about the workplace.

From this example, we can, I believe, explicate the general nature of considerations of efficiency and how they relate to our claims to egalitarian social relations. First, they are not moral but prudential considerations⁵³. They derive their force and weight from their role in securing personal well-being. As such, the relevant notion of costs is also broader and relates to any well-being costs accrued on grounds of taking less efficient means. Since, as I have argued above, efficiency plausibly derives its value from its instrumental role as a source of well-being. Moreover, in their function of supporting reasons for toleration, they are in a sense of commensurable nature. They weigh against our egalitarian *pro tanto* reasons for advancing egalitarian social relations but do not trump them. Lastly, we should not forget that their validity depends on contextual features. As in the case of consideration from merit, it is thus necessary to show how these considerations weigh in specific social contexts, and under which circumstances they will be decisive. This involves the task of showing that a trade-off between higher transaction and opportunity costs and greater social equality is all-things-considered acceptable. For this, we need to inquire whether advancing our claims to egalitarian social relations, on the account defended in this thesis, is sufficiently feasible or reasonably costly, from the perspective of efficiency, in close, personal relationships as well as wider, societal relations.

We have already seen how they are usually interpreted in one instance of close, personal relations, namely in the workplace. Thus, let us first consider this type of social contexts. Are our reasons for

⁵³ Which is not to deny that the reasons which they support can be moral – i.e. if we have valid reasons for promoting individuals' well-being in general.

equally promoting people's interests in social agency outweighed by considerations that tell us to tolerate unequal levels of social agency because of the efficiency costs that meeting these claims will incur? Does promoting adequate and equal capacities of social agency come at the cost of foregoing other well-being advantages, so that we would, on balance of reasons, deem doing so inefficient? In other words, we are interested here in the question of whether a version of the efficiency trade-off argument applies against our claims to egalitarian social relations in close, personal relationships.

Note, first, that considerations from efficiency and our reasons for advancing claims to egalitarian relations are seemingly somewhat on par. Both have a concern for the well-being of individuals at their heart. In a sense, what we assess here is the relative weight of advancing some well-being interest (that of social agency) equally against that of some other well-being goods, the provision of which can only be achieved by tolerating some social hierarchies. For example, we can imagine a group of friends, who, over a considerable timespan, collectively set out to realise a certain project of, let's say, plan a lengthier joint holiday. They can go about this both while promoting every member's interest in enjoying egalitarian relations, by making sure that everyone's voice is heard and equally taken seriously and by allowing for individual members of the group to choose how they want to contribute to the project organisation (i.e. pick a specific role in planning the trip). But because due coordination is very time-intensive and those friends all have other things to manage, too, we can also imagine that someone is tempted to make use of their good standing in the group to just grab the lead, choose but two destinations for everyone to agree on, assign the roles for planning travel and accommodation, and be done with it⁵⁴. As our friends have all very busy lives, they might all-things-considered occasionally even prefer the latter way of doing things. A hierarchical organisation comes with lower transaction costs and the gains foregone – the

⁵⁴ A temptation that anyone who was at least once involved in such a group planning effort surely understands.

sacrificed additional well-being from exercises of social agency – might be outweighed by the more efficient, authoritarian style of holiday planning.

Should we be inclined to believe that our claims to egalitarian social relations are relatively outweighed in this scenario? Not quite, I think. Once more I want to argue that, only in a limited manner, can we reasonably be expected to accept such trade-offs between gains from efficiency and egalitarian advances. This is because of two points: first and to reiterate from previous sections, adjusting our dispositions and behaviour in ways to promote others' social agency is usually not very costly in close, personal relationships. The potential gains from efficiency through instancing inegalitarian social relations are thus comparatively small. Even in the example above, the raw output gains are rather trivial, especially once we consider the exemplary role that close, personal relationships play for one's effective exercise of social agency. For a great range of such social contexts, it is difficult to see how such small efficiency gains can outweigh our egalitarian reasons to promote everyone's social agency equally. There are, however, social contexts where those gains are more substantial, as in the workplace organisation. This brings me to the second point. As the gains from efficiency weigh only gradually against our reasons to promote egalitarian social relations, this suggests we should consider them in a more nuanced way. It matters in this regard, whether individuals are treated (and regarded), in absolute terms, with low or no social consideration, or whether they are adequately so treated but with less than some others receive. It clearly seems more reasonable to tolerate hierarchical social relations when some level of adequacy of social consideration is reached. When, for example, workers' voices are sufficiently recognised in some decisions within the firm even though this falls short of being a perfect workplace democracy⁵⁵. The trade-off argument gains traction only above the threshold of adequacy when the non-comparative requirements for egalitarian social relations are met. For those reasons, I suggest that we should concede to tolerating inegalitarian social relations on grounds of efficiency

⁵⁵ In that regard, the Austrian and German institutions of economic codetermination and collective bargaining can be understood as mechanisms to ensure a decent level of equality within the economic sphere (see e.g. Heinisch, 1999).

only when a) the gains are substantial enough and b) when a sufficient non-comparative level of social agency is secured. Both turns on the function and features of the social relation in question. At least, regarding close, personal relationships.

This sets a clear limit to the role that considerations from efficiency play with regard to our egalitarian claims in such social contexts. For the evaluation of workplace organisation, this implies on my account, for example, that it must be demonstrated that a decent level of inclusion and participation is guaranteed and that the potential gains from hierarchical relations justifiably offset our egalitarian interests. And as the current institutions of workplace organisation worldwide tend to swing heavily to the opposite current, towards more stratification, this gives egalitarians good reasons, as Motchoulski (2024) likewise argues, to think that the workplace generally needs to be reformed in more non-hierarchical ways. The account established in this chapter affirms these points and reinforcingly supports these claims.

Shifting the focus to wider, societal relations, considerations of costs from efficiency also appear, albeit with a different target. Establishing egalitarian social relations on this level requires, as I have argued, that all agents subjected to such relations are treated with equal and adequate recognition respect. Now, social hierarchies in such a context are a permeating and enduring social fact in our world. Reforming our social relations thus is likely to come with both opportunity costs and transaction costs. It entails such costs because the success of interventions in status ascriptions based on social norms is, as various accounts in the literature demonstrate (see e.g. Bicchieri, 2016; Brennan et al., 2013), dependent on effective coordination. Only if a sufficient number of individuals change both their empirical beliefs and normative expectations about a norm-based status ascription, will such an operative social norm be altered or dismissed (cf. Bicchieri, 2006). Yet such orchestrated coordination is – assuming that it is even possible – costly. Moreover, it is not clear that these costs of intervening are overall justified. If we are to change the social institutions that sustain social status hierarchies, we also forego the benefits that such a historically

grown hierarchy provides. We could, instead, stick with a chivalric paradise (cf. the Razian thought experiment ‘Hierarcadia’ briefly mentioned earlier), in which everyone is firmly attached to their hierarchically ordered social roles and for which we assume that this system works for this reason just efficiently. In addition to that, honouring or respecting others as equals imposes a *prima facie* duty on all agents in social relations. But, again, a concerted effort to effectively change social institutions leads to many individual instances of transactional costs. To achieve such a collective aim, people need to spend resources on devising and planning how they individually will contribute so that this goal actually manifests. All the resources spent for this effort though, could be invested in means for achieving other, morally salient goals. Thus, meeting claims to egalitarian social relations in social contexts that already feature entrenched social hierarchies, again brings forth efficiency-based reasons to tolerate social hierarchies.

Note that, compared to close, personal relationships, these reasons derive their normative weight from both their moral reasonableness and practical feasibility. We encounter considerations of the former in both types of social contexts when we weigh whether the costs of bringing about egalitarian relations are reasonable or contemplate whether we should reasonably tolerate some hierarchies instead. I have argued that we can reasonably be asked to relate to others as equals in close, personal relationships because, *inter alia*, such social contexts are a special source for realising the value of social agency. That said, the case for egalitarian relations in wider, societal relations is not necessarily less weighty. Even if we imagine that status-based, mediated hierarchies may, because of their nature, impact one’s level of social agency less – because we still have our close, personal egalitarian social relationships – permitting hierarchies in these relations comes with additional costs. When we tolerate such hierarchies of status, or even publicly recognise them through law and state action, this has an expressive dimension. What individuals and institutions express in their treatment of others is, as Schemmel (2021) argues, an irreducible concern of egalitarian justice and genuinely matters for a just society (see Schemmel, 2021, 38–44). Even when

we have cost-based reasons in these social contexts; when relying on those to justify the toleration of social hierarchies, we express in an objectionable way that those inferiorly ranked matter less or inadequately. In allowing for such a trade-off, we neglect that their interests in being treated as an equal fundamentally matter equally. This added dimension makes the case for tolerating social hierarchies on grounds of efficiency less plausible. People treated that way may rightfully resent us or the state for being treated so, even if a principled justification from considerations of efficiency is available. This fits well with the normative account of recognition respect defended in Chapter 4. It reinforces our deontological respect-based reasons for advancing egalitarian social relations and, I believe, tips the balance of reasons against the case of reasonable toleration of social hierarchies.

This, however, does not yet consider appropriately the issue of practical feasibility. In close, personal relationships, matters of feasibility are for an overall evaluation and justification of hierarchies not similarly relevant. As I have argued, we can alter our relationships comparatively easy and without greater costs. Now, in wider, societal relations, costs from the perspective of feasibility do take centre stage though. The example of social status hierarchies from above illustrates this. It is not clear, not even on our most sophisticated account of operative social norms, whether such systems of stratified status ascriptions can feasibly be changed or, crucially for us, changed without great costs.

This points, I think, to a main challenge for our claims to egalitarian social relations in these contexts. Does the fact that meeting these claims brings us to the limits of practical feasibility change our judgment on whether we can reasonably be asked to take on the corresponding duties? I believe that this hinges on our understanding of feasibility in this context. Naturally, we are interested here in the limits of feasibility from the point of view of our actual, non-ideal world (cf. Valentini, 2012), where social hierarchies are an enduring social fact. On a strong reading, social science provides us with exact data on what is feasible action in this world. If e.g., stratified social

norms prove to be too elusive to grasp and change for any agent, then this narrows the scope of our moral claims against and duties to combat them. On a more concessive reading, we can accept that the prospects for directly altering our social reality are limited, but still try to take up measures for tackling these problems indirectly. If the problem of enduring social status hierarchies is that inadequate and unequal social consideration is given to individuals, then we can attempt to find ways to secure more such social consideration for those through other channels. This allows for meeting those claims through actions that are independent of what we normally take it to require to relate to others as equals (changing our dispositions, beliefs, and so forth) and licences other, more capable agents to make strives for achieving more equality indirectly.

The main contender for such a capable agent is, of course, the state. Through law and state legislation, we can seek to reduce existing social hierarchies. The state can, for example, legislate cultural policies aiming at increasing the social esteem that marginalized, inferiorly treated groups receive. Or implement educational policies that counteract prejudice and stereotypes of members of society through information provided in schools. And many more such venues are potentially worthwhile considering. Thus, some issues of feasibility can be resolved once we broaden our view on how the corresponding duties to our egalitarian claims can be met. And as nothing of this *eo ipso* necessarily implies great or unreasonable costs, we can also dismiss some concerns from feasibility. In principle, these thus do not strengthen the case for efficiency-based considerations against our claims to egalitarian relations.

This solution to the feasibility aspect of considerations from efficiency leads, however, once again to other issues. Permitting the state to take on such a great role in intervening and altering our social reality does again seem to call for a higher justificatory burden to be met. As in the case of considerations from paternalism, this does call for further argument showing that the state has indeed the mandate to enforce these claims to egalitarian social relations. This is particularly relevant in the case here, not least because rejecting the view that considerations from costliness

are weighty enough for us to tolerate social hierarchies also places substantive burdens on individuals. If considerations from efficiency do not outweigh our claims to egalitarian social relations, and the state is a primary vehicle to enforce these claims, then individuals are tasked with, albeit justified, additional costs. Since, even if state policy is what helps tackle social hierarchies, it is individuals who bear these costly duties to bring this social equality about. It is not (just) institutions who are attributed duties but plausibly also individuals.

Placing such burdens on individual by the state, by way of the additional costs they face, may be seen as objectionably overdemanding, intrusive in people's personal affairs or even infringing on some of their individual rights. Thus, we are once more entering the different normative territory of liberal requirements for a just state, a concern akin to the worry about state perfectionism that we encountered in the previous discussion of considerations about paternalism. Dismissing considerations about efficiency and coordination costs does therefore not settle the overall question of costs that is involved in realising claims to egalitarian social relations. Although they have these claims and corresponding duties to advance egalitarian social relations, individuals may still object to being subjected to state authority and power that demands them to adjust their dispositions, beliefs, and attitudes. And they may do so on grounds of the additional, *unjust* costs that these substantive burdens placed on them entail.

Therefore, I conclude that the case of considerations about costs is not exhausted by rejecting considerations of efficiency and coordination costs. Although it has been shown that considerations from efficiency only in rare instances outweigh our reasons to advance egalitarian social relations, namely under certain circumstances in close, personal relationships, there remains a residual issue of individual costs and demandingness that requires further examination. This concerns the independent question of whether the substantial burdens placed on individuals this way are legitimate and just in a liberal state. Thus, as before, I shall take this up in Chapter 6 again.

But first, let me conclude this chapter by bringing the derived insights into these varying considerations and reasons against advancing our claims to egalitarian relations together.

5.4 The all-things-considered standing of claims to egalitarian social relations

In this chapter, we have encountered several considerations that support reasons for contesting our claims to egalitarian social relations. As I have argued, such competing considerations do so either by outweighing or by excluding our *pro tanto* egalitarian reasons. The ones we considered – considerations from merit, paternalism, and costs on grounds of efficiency – are commonly taken to give rise to reasons for permitting or even requiring inequalitarian relations between individuals. The analyses of this chapter, however, have shown that this is not generally true. On the contrary, they have demonstrated that our claims to egalitarian social relations are largely vindicated. Let me review what we have found regarding each particular type of considerations, before drawing a conclusive verdict about the all-things-considered standing of our egalitarian claims on that basis.

We found that considerations of merit play a limited role in determining our all-things-considered judgement about our egalitarian claims. Only in social contexts with close, personal relationships can considerations of merit, occasionally, be decisive against our *pro tanto* claims to enjoy egalitarian social relations. These apply only when certain context- and content-limitations of such merit hierarchies are in place and, further, when individuals receive a decent level of social consideration. Under different circumstances, and for social contexts involving wider, societal relations, considerations of merit do not trump our claims to an egalitarian social standing. Thus, it is not generally reasonable to permit inequalitarian social relations on grounds of merit.

Considerations of paternalism are of a different nature, compared to those of merit. They measure against our claims and threaten to, potentially, outweigh them. Concerning these considerations, we first observed that the relevant scope of paternalism of our inquiry is broad, i.e. we have reason to take into account any interferences by individuals, social institutions, and the state. Against a

concern with such paternalistic interventions, we found the following: strong paternalistic actions, while indeed objectionable and not permissible to meet our claims, are categorically ruled out by our claims to egalitarian social relations. Weakly paternalistic interferences, however, turned out to be overall permissible in close, personal relationships, and seem, at least in principle, justifiable in wider, societal relations. To allow for acting weakly paternalistic to realise claims to egalitarian relations is indeed a reasonable ask of us. As such, they do not outweigh our reasons for meeting claims to egalitarian social relations. That said, I submitted that a residual concern with weakly paternalistic state actions remains, namely in the guise of (comprehensive) perfectionism. An overall justification of weak paternalism for enforcing claims to egalitarian social relations thus requires further argument defending against this liberal charge. I shall take up this matter in the following chapter.

Lastly, we turned to considerations about costs, primarily in the form that they usually take when levelled against considerations about equality (broadly speaking) – efficiency. Starting from a debate where these considerations have seen most discussion, workplace hierarchies, I argued that we can, in general, understand such efficiency-based considerations in terms of transaction and opportunity costs, which support reasons to tolerate certain hierarchies. Once more, the reasons for tolerations derived from these considerations about costs of (in)efficiency are commensurable to our egalitarian reasons. They thus weigh against our egalitarian claims. Yet, again, we found that such considerations are only rarely outweighing them. In close, personal relationships where the gains are substantial enough and people receive an adequate level of consideration, they can justify tolerating some hierarchies.

In societal relations, on the other hand, the case is more complex. While it is generally not reasonable to tolerate social hierarchies there, not least because the additional, expressive costs of such toleration need to be imported into our moral calculus, considerations about costs gain some weight from the perspective of feasibility. If our claims to egalitarian social relations stretch the

limits of practical feasibility, then cost and efficiency-based reasons for toleration seem sufficiently weighty. That said, I argued that on a plausible reading of feasibility, we sometimes can dismiss these worries by licensing the state to attempt to meet our egalitarian claims by indirect means. While this renders considerations about efficiency less weighty, this comes at the cost of accepting greater, potentially intrusive state power and significant individual burdens. As with considerations of merit, the case of cost-based considerations is thus not conclusive but requires further argument showing that these burdens and privileges can be justified in a liberal society. This adds to the task of the next chapter. Bracketing these two liberal issues found in the discussions on paternalism and costs for now though, we can preliminarily conclude that a trade-off between our egalitarian claims and efficiency is not, generally, reasonable.

Taking all this into account, these analyses still yield a comprehensive picture. We can generally hold that on the grounds of these claims, we have strong reasons to alter our social reality insofar as it falls short of the egalitarian ideal. Our interests in having egalitarian social relations between us, which derive itself from the value of social agency, are sufficiently weighty to specify that in both close, personal and wide, societal relations. Only in exceptional cases can these be outweighed or trumped.

Now, inequalitarian relations or hierarchies take on different forms in different social contexts. Status-based hierarchies in society are different from the hierarchy between a patriarchal man and his spouse. Mores, such hierarchies can be met with different attitudes. We can try to outright abolish them, or we can try to reform and remake them in (more) egalitarian ways. The former naturally has more radical implications. Abolishing a hierarchy can come at the cost (and function) of the relationship in question (recall, again, the point from Raz's chivalric paradise). We can assume that it follows from the account defended over the past chapter, that abolishing hierarchies is the preferred course of action in social contexts where we found contesting considerations in all cases lacking. If there are no potential exceptions to the validity of our egalitarian claims, then this

gives us reason to reject these morally deficient social relations. An example would be social relations structured by caste or bondage systems. There, no competing considerations could ever outweigh or trump our claims against such a system. A clear, all-things-considered moral justification is available. Hence, we have good reason to straightforwardly abolish these instances of social hierarchy no matter the cost that arises from that.

Things are somewhat different in social contexts where the considerations discussed above can apply – merit in certain close, personal relationships, paternalism and cost-efficiency in both close and wide social relations. Here we arguably have reason to proceed in more tempered ways and should attempt to find ways to refashion such relations in ways that bring them (closer) to the egalitarian ideal. This is because both the reasonableness and feasibility of changing such social relations come in degrees. If contesting considerations are in principle available, then this tells us something about how we should go about them. We ought to find reasonable and practically feasible ways to alter such relationships without abandoning them completely. If a consideration of paternalism, for example, applies, then we should be careful in our attempt to engineer our social reality by taking such concerns into account. For a large number of social hierarchies, I believe the argument in this chapter shows that this way of reform is the preferred and all-things-considered justified course of action.

Lastly, in social contexts where we have all-things-considered reason to tolerate, or on other grounds permit, social hierarchies, we should still not dismiss the interests in enjoying egalitarian social relations. The aforementioned typical teacher-student or mentor-mentee relationship that we often see justified on grounds of considerations of merit, is an example of that. While we may have sufficient reason to accept or even welcome such relationships because of the distinct goods they realise by way of their hierarchical character, we should still remain attentive and vigilant should there ever arise ways to make those relations more egalitarian. Even if outweighed (and arguably

also sometimes when they are trumped), our egalitarian reasons do not cease to exist. They still retain some of their normative weight and we should take this into account and act accordingly.

In sum, the theory developed throughout the past two chapters delivers a, I believe, quite nuanced account of our claims to egalitarian social relations, their implications and limitations. Its arguments do not allow for a sweeping dismissal of all hierarchical social relations but show, in a rather piecemeal manner, when we have all-things-considered reason to permit, reform, or abolish social hierarchies. This I take to be a feature not a bug of the account, though.

With that in mind, we can turn to the last substantive argument and last chapter of this thesis, which is dedicated to a justification of our egalitarian claims on liberal grounds, addressing the residual and specifically liberal worries about state neutrality and justice that we have identified in this chapter.

CHAPTER 6.

JUSTIFYING CLAIMS TO EGALITARIAN SOCIAL RELATIONS AGAINST THE LIBERAL STATE

Our claims to egalitarian relations withstand, so I have argued in the previous chapter, many competing considerations for tolerating social hierarchies. That is, they often or typically either outweigh or cannot be trumped by considerations that support reasons for permitting inegalitarian social relations. However, as we have seen, two types of concerns emerged that could not be outright dismissed. Rather, they brought forward a novel, interrelated but independent challenge to meeting the demands of claims to egalitarian relations: a liberal charge of state interference and a liberal charge of (over-)demandingness. The former asserts that realising claims to egalitarian relations requires the use of substantial state power that by itself needs to be shown is legitimate. The latter refers to an implication of the hitherto established account, namely that both institutions and individuals are charged with substantial duties; a demand which potentially unduly burdens individuals. These charges are primarily about the means then, by which the state might achieve the goal of social equality.

Both charges share a certain background. They are deeply anchored in a liberal vision of political morality and its central place of a principle of state neutrality. As such, their motivation is derived from considerations about the conditions and limits of a legitimate, just liberal state. Since claims to egalitarian social relations pose significant duties on state and individuals, these considerations call into question whether this can be achieved while honouring liberal commitments. If plausible, these show that, although we, as individuals, might have good moral reasons for advancing interests in egalitarian social relations, enforcing these claims by the state turns out to be prohibited by a liberal doctrine. Thus, employing coercive state power for that meeting that end is illegitimate. So far, I have only tacitly assumed that our claims to egalitarian social relations are consistent with a

liberal outlook on justice and legitimacy, broadly conceived. Yet should it turn out that these liberal worries cannot be invalidated, then they are not and as such cannot be part of what we owe to each other as a matter of justice. This, of course, is damning to a theory of the morality of egalitarian social relations, since it renders our claims devoid of much of their normative force. For that reason, these charges need to be rejected, and for this, it needs to be shown, as a last step in this thesis' argument, that the demands of our egalitarian claims can be justified in accordance with liberal constraints on the exercise of state power.

The aim of this last chapter of the thesis is therefore to demonstrate that the twofold liberal challenge can be met. I shall do so by considering the nature of these worries about neutrality first, illustrate what is at stake in concerns about perfectionism next, and eventually establish what I believe is a reasonable response from the perspective of our interests in egalitarian social relations that is acceptable from a liberal perspective.

For this purpose, the chapter is structured as follows. In section 6.1, I introduce the basic assumptions in the concerns from liberal neutrality as levelled against claims to egalitarian social relations, explain how they relate to the questions about perfectionism and the site of justice in the liberal state, and, lastly, show in which sense they can be decisive against our egalitarian claims. With that, I proceed in section 6.2 by presenting in detail the range of comprehensive to political views within contemporary liberal theory and discuss the standing of our egalitarian claims from that perspective. This yields a substantive liberal conception on which I show that such claims can consistently and plausibly be defended. Against this background, I illustrate in section 6.3, how this view can dismiss both the illegitimate state interference and the demandingness concerns from neutrality, by engaging with the debate about liberal (anti-)perfectionism and the so-called site of justice debate in political philosophy.

6.1 Social equality and the neutral state

The worries regarding claims to egalitarian relations that I address in this chapter stem from considerations about core commitments of liberalism, specifically from tenets about justice and legitimacy in the liberal state. Let me give a few general remarks about their nature and provenance here first, before articulating the specific ways in which they are threatening the egalitarian claims defended in this thesis.

Now, it is needless to say that the overall scope and project of liberalism is wide-ranging. As Courtland et al. (2022) argue,

“Liberal theories form a broad continuum, from those that constitute full-blown philosophical systems, to those that rely on a full theory of value and the good, to those that rely on a theory of the right (but not the good), all the way to those that seek to be purely political doctrines.” (Courtland et al., 2022; cf. Gaus, 2004)

Liberal philosophy is thus best described as a broad family of views that assign some central place to the value of individual liberty. For the purpose of this chapter, however, we are interested here in liberal philosophy in a narrower sense. The liberal theories that concern us are that of political morality, which articulates the demands of legitimacy and justice in a liberal society. A crucial element in such a liberal political theory is a principle of (state) neutrality. Liberal theory thus understood recognises, on the one hand, that there matters for citizens where the state has no mandate to get involved with and, on the other hand, that the state ought to be neutral between its citizens’ conceptions of the good (cf. Zellentin, 2012). These specify a necessary condition for the exercise of state power and permissible coercion. One fairly general way to formulate such a principle of liberal political neutrality can be found in the following, Gaussian variant:

“An agent of the state when coercing a citizen, or participating in the authorization of such coercion, must be neutral between that citizen and any other citizen: the justification of the state official’s coercion must not treat differentially reasonable and reflective citizen’s differences in their evaluative standards.” (Gaus, 2009, 105)

Liberal justice requires, *inter alia*, that the justification for state action is neutral between reasonable citizens' conceptions of the good and acknowledges that there are limits to how intrusive state power permissibly can be in individuals' lives. This is what individuals are owed by the liberal state. Since Rawls's (1971) landmark theory, liberal political philosophy has developed different, competing approaches for spelling out what such neutrality substantively requires. We will encounter these in detail shortly, but for now, let us consider how liberal neutrality can come into conflict with the demands of claims to egalitarian social relations in general. After all, with and after Rawls, much liberal theory has assumed that some type of liberal-egalitarianism is not only a quite plausible theory of political morality but also shows that egalitarian demands, properly understood, are consistent with liberal requirements (see e.g. Dworkin, 2000).

This kind of liberal-egalitarian theorising which attempts to justify distributive equality within liberal constraints is, however, in some sense relevantly different from social or relational egalitarian demands. Not least because social equality can be understood as a thick or a thin moral and social ideal. Early social egalitarians, like the British socialist Tawney (1931), which Schemmel (2021) presents as 'forerunners' of contemporary social egalitarian positions, think of social equality as a "comprehensive vision of solidarity among equals as the chief human good to be achieved in social life" (Schemmel, 2021, 8; see also Wolff, 2015). Similar in spirit are social-liberal authors such as Miller (2001) and Mason (2015), who present an ideal of social equality independent of or in addition to requirements flowing from a theory of justice. This understanding of social equality renders it potentially inconsistent with liberal neutrality since liberal justice restricts itself to ensuring that everyone's rights are respected. This also contrasts with the more recent relational egalitarian project which attempts to justify social egalitarian demands as requirements of justice. Hence, as a thinner conception that fits into a general, liberal framework of justice. It is not least because of this internal tension in social egalitarian thinking that Schemmel aspires to show in his comprehensive (2021) account of this relationship between social equality and liberal justice that

“liberal social justice can be home to a demanding conception of egalitarian relations, and that such a conception can be arrived at from premises thinner than those traditionally endorsed by many social egalitarians.” (Schemmel, 2021, 5)

Against this background, we can reasonably assume that claims to egalitarian social relations, as developed in the specific sense of this thesis, face similar concerns from liberal neutrality. And, since I have assumed throughout the argument that claims to egalitarian social relations can indeed be part of what we owe to each other, it needs to be shown that these liberal worries can be accommodated. That is, these claims can be met without presupposing an ideal of social equality as the supreme good to be realised in human affairs, without infringing on people’s conceptions of the good, and without telling them how to lead their lives according to a particular vision of a good, communal life. This is the vision of *relational* liberal justice⁵⁶ that, I believe, we have reason to aspire to in justifying our claims to egalitarian social relations.

These are the general background ideas motivating liberal concerns against the claims brought forward in this thesis, which gleamed through in the discussions of anti-egalitarian considerations in section 5.2. and 5.3 of the previous chapter. As I have uncovered there, the specific liberal concerns that follow from that are twofold: in analysing considerations about paternalism in general, we derived a particular and independent concern with illegitimate state perfectionism. Then, in examining considerations about costs, we found a separate concern with undue burdens assigned to individuals. We can now put those into more concrete terms from the perspective of liberal neutrality. The first set of concerns asserts that realising claims to egalitarian social relations, at least in some social contexts, is akin to implementing or enforcing a comprehensive social ideal. This requires extensive and coercive state action, the use of which appears to be problematic in a liberal state that ought to remain neutral about individual conceptions of the good. The second set of concerns asserts that in administering justice, part of which our egalitarian claims allegedly are,

⁵⁶ To recall from the distinctions introduced earlier (see Chapter 1), I separate questions of relational from those about distributive moral requirements. Relational justice thus concerns what we owe to each other in terms of what flows from our claims to egalitarian social relations, *as* a matter of justice.

the state needs to assign significant burdens to individuals. Yet, when these claims are demanded by the state, they unduly burden the individual. Thus, while we as individuals may have reasons to, as best as possible, advance egalitarian social relations, the same task appears to be prohibited for the liberal state. Both sets of considerations, though, stem from the same worry about liberal neutrality.

These considerations form the basis for the discussions in the following sections 6.2. and 6.3. of this chapter. Before turning to these, however, it is helpful to have clarity about the circumstances under which these concerns can defeat the validity of our egalitarian claims. This gives us a yardstick for evaluating the overall plausibility of these liberal concerns and for judging when they are decisive against our claims to egalitarian social relations.

Note first that both these worries about neutrality can actually be consistent with a variety of liberal views⁵⁷. Regarding the first worry about perfectionism, within liberal political theory, conceptions of political legitimacy range, for example, from comprehensive to political doctrines. Some of those accounts defend a particular ethical theory as the ground of liberalism and add to that by prescribing the state to act on perfectionist judgements derived from that ground. Others, following the late Rawls's (1993) work, establish such accounts of permissible state coercion while remaining neutral on all, potentially controversial, moral ideals. A substantial range of views also exists in the literature regarding the subject of the second worry. There, some theories of justice have been defended that assign principles of justice only to institutions, such as those following the Rawlsian argument seeing only the basic structure of society as the proper site of egalitarian justice (see e.g. Carter, 2013; Williams, 1998). But others, such as Cohen (2008) have argued that egalitarian duties of

⁵⁷ It is relevant to state here that the views that I briefly describe in the following are not exclusively (at least) concerned with the issues that we are interested in here. Rather, their positions have been established taking many more considerations into account. I.e. the comprehensive-political liberal debate is not exhausted by the specific issue of paternalism that I am interested in this chapter, and neither is the question of the site of justice fully captured by the particular worry of demandingness that I am discussing here. However, within the variety of liberal theories of justice, these specific points have been discussed among the many considerations that support or invalidate a particular view.

justice (also) fall onto individuals. Thus, there is a range of institutionalist, non-institutionalist⁵⁸, to even anti-institutionalist views on the subject of agents and the site of justice. It is an open question whether liberal justice can be convincingly – neutrally – served on all such accounts, not least precisely because those worries are often cited – but it is a non-trivial question to ask, nevertheless.

So, regarding these liberal worries, I believe it is paramount to inquire with which type of liberal view our claims to egalitarian social relations are compatible in the first place. For this, we should ask, on the one hand, whether the so far established egalitarian claims entail a necessarily comprehensive or perfectionist liberal stance and, if so, whether this position is open to those charges of illegitimate state interference or whether this is, all things considered, plausibly justifiable on liberal grounds. On the other hand, we should ask whether our egalitarian claims presuppose a non-institutionalist or even anti-institutionalist stance about justice. And thus, whether they can only be met if the standard liberal position of institutionalism is rejected. We are therein interested in which position towards the site of justice question our view leans to and, thereby, how plausible concerns about significant individual burdens turn out to be.

The remainder of this chapter is therefore an attempt to engage the previously defended claims to egalitarian social relations with certain liberal considerations, namely those about the conditions of justice and the limits of permissible state action that are motivated by a principle of liberal neutrality. With that, I turn to this last twofold substantive task in this thesis.

⁵⁸ As a matter of terminology, I am using the term ‘non-institutionalist’ here to denote those views that deny that only institutions matter for the question of the site of justice. These include accounts that hold only individual actions as the entities to which principles of justice apply as well as those that accept both individual actions and institutions as the objects of justice.

6.2 Liberal anxieties about claims to egalitarian social relations

6.2.1 Liberal egalitarian social relations: comprehensive or political, perfectionist or anti-perfectionist?

Let us start addressing these questions of liberal neutrality by considering the debate about perfectionism in politics and the respective standing of our claims to egalitarian relations from that perspective. Where do our egalitarian claims fall on the range of comprehensive to political views and does that show that enforcing these claims is plausibly permissible from a liberal standpoint? The debate about perfectionism has generated a wide and extensive literature in moral and political philosophy, covering a variety of separate normative questions (see e.g. Church, 2019). My main interlocutor for this discussion here is Jonathan Quong's comprehensive (pun intended) assessment of (anti-)perfectionism in contemporary political philosophy specifically, and his helpful reconstruction of the main positions within this more restricted, liberal debate.

In his (2011) book, Quong provides a detailed map of this dispute that is internal to contemporary liberal theory. As he shows, this centres on two questions that are relevant for any liberal account broadly conceived. First, one is about whether liberalism should best be understood as a comprehensive or political doctrine. That is, whether liberal credentials are derived from a particular ideal of what constitutes a valuable human life or whether they can be defended as a free-standing conception. We can approach this question in the following way: perfectionist considerations are judgments about the intrinsic or inherent value of activities, goals, and relationships. The full set of any such perfectionist judgements that an individual holds is their conception of the good, as their conception of human flourishing (see Quong, 2011, 13). Following Rawls (1993), we can say that if one such conception "covers all recognized values and virtues within one rather precisely articulated system" (Rawls, 1993, 13), then that conception is a comprehensive doctrine. Free-floating or political doctrines, on the other hand, are characterised by three different features. They are a) of limited scope, restrict themselves to claims of justice and

legitimacy, based only on public or political values, b) avoid making perfectionist judgements and metaphysical claims (epistemological and ontological.), and c) the values that ground them will be robust across all permissible conceptions of the good (Quong, 2011, 14). That persons are free and equal, from the political point of view, and as such have certain basic rights and liberties, the protection of which they are entitled to, expresses, for example, such public or political values.

The second question, then, is a subsequent and independent one about whether the state is permitted to promote or discourage certain ways of life on grounds of their value for individuals. That is, whether perfectionist considerations can serve as valid reasons for coercive state action (ibid., 15, 18).

It follows from this mapping that four positions are logically possible, according to whether one answers these questions affirmatively or negatively. Those who answer the first question with yes are comprehensive liberals, those who think that the answer to it is negative, can be described as non-comprehensive or political liberals. Furthermore, if one answers the second question with yes, then they are in the camp of perfectionist liberals and, likewise, if one rejects that, then they are best described as anti-perfectionists. Thus, as liberals, we have the choice, so to say, between assuming a comprehensive perfectionist (as e.g. Raz, 1986), political perfectionist (as, possibly⁵⁹, Sher, 1997), comprehensive anti-perfectionist (e.g. Dworkin, 2000), or political anti-perfectionist (besides Rawls, 1993, e.g. Larmore, 1990) stance. In structuring it this way, Quong helpfully expands the terms of a debate that has traditionally been framed as a choice between comprehensive perfectionists, on the one hand, and political liberals (or political anti-perfectionists), on the other (cf. Quong, 2011, 16).

⁵⁹ Quong suggests we attribute this position to Sher's (1997), as Sher argues that "there is room for a [...] view, one that does not seek to *ground* the state in any particular conception of the good, but nevertheless holds that a government may legitimately *promote* the good" (Sher, 1997, 1).

All four positions are not only logically possible but each of them is also substantively plausible and has some independent appeal (at least to some degree – as Quong points out, e.g. political perfectionism, in particular, may be harder to defend). And while individual substantive accounts of these positions vary, there are some common themes among them. Comprehensive and perfectionist conceptions naturally lean towards objectivism about value. Hedonist or preference satisfaction accounts of well-being are, for example, harder to make sense of in such theories. The classical (in the historical sense) liberal case for comprehensive perfectionism assumes both that the ultimate justification of liberal rights lies in some objective value and that the state should try to promote forms of life on those grounds (within the permissible range set by those rights). Such comprehensive perfectionism has, as Quong notes, a certain appeal: it offers an intuitively compelling account of political institutions, and why we need to have them. It is intuitive since it allows for considering all reasons in justifying state action and offers an attractive account of the relationship between liberal politics and human flourishing in general (ibid., 30f.).

The main rivals to these are anti-perfectionist approaches. Comprehensive anti-perfectionists do agree with the former on the first part of the conjunction above, but they part ways in the second, because they think, for example, that the same value that justifies liberal rights “also entails that the state should not aim to promote or discourage any particular activities, ideals, or ways of life for perfectionist reasons” (ibid., 19). The other is political liberalism (in the anti-perfectionist sense, for reasons noted above), which stays agnostic about the nature of value but holds that liberalism should not be grounded in any comprehensive doctrine and that the liberal state cannot permissibly justify laws and policies by reference to this doctrine. Quong, who defends such a view, thinks of political liberalism as “an attempt to work out how political principles and institutions can be publicly justified by reference to moral ideas that each person who is bound by them could reasonably endorse” (ibid., 36). This is, according to him, a superior approach because it takes seriously that in liberal societies, we face “deep, permanent, and intractable disagreements about

central philosophical, moral, and religious issues” (ibid., 36). And as such, compellingly asserts that the exercise of coercive political power needs to be justified to every reasonable citizen⁶⁰, which can only be achieved on such neutral grounds.

As we can see, the question of which type of liberalism we should subscribe to is non-trivial. Where we come down on both axes has certain implications about how we should, as a matter of consistency, think of the requirements of social and economic justice as well. While the distinctions go beyond matters of justice in liberal theory, it remains a relevant subject of consideration whether we should be comprehensive or non-comprehensive liberals, perfectionists or not, regarding our general thinking about the value of justice. This is a question that can then be posed to any account of egalitarian justice that justifies its requirements on liberal grounds. Thus, this applies to our claims to egalitarian social relations as well. Since, as I have argued in the section before, we have good reasons for aspiring to justify those claims within a thinner, liberal conception of justice, rather than seeing them as following from a thick moral or social ideal. So, as a first step for addressing the liberal worries about neutrality, we can ask where the conception of egalitarian claims defended in the prior chapters falls regarding the (non-)comprehensive/(anti-)perfectionist divide in liberal theorising.

To be clear here though, it is not a *desideratum* for our claims to egalitarian social relations to be on either side of the divide. Their validity stands, or so I have attempted to show, on independent grounds. That said, however, it is nevertheless relevant to find out whether these egalitarian claims presuppose a comprehensive and/or perfectionist liberal understanding. Not least, because this will allow us to see how the specific concern from neutrality, about state perfectionism and justice,

⁶⁰ To be precise, Quong advances, what he calls, an ‘internal conception’ of political liberalism, according to which “public justification is owed to a set of ideal citizens who already accept liberalism’s main commitments: those of society as a fair system of social cooperation between free and equal citizens, and reasonable disagreement as a fact of liberalism” (Moles, 2013, 104; cf. also Billingham, 2017).

should be addressed. But also, because it might tell us something more general about the overall relationship between our conception of social equality and liberal rights.

Now, when we compare how I have described these claims with the scheme provided by Quong's quadripartite distinction, several points stand out. On the comprehensive/non-comprehensive axis, what arguably comes to mind first, is the apparent proximity of our egalitarian claims to comprehensive liberal positions. Remember, those are positions that justify liberal requirements by appealing to a comprehensive ideal. Razian liberalism is, for example, such a position that grounds those in the value of personal autonomy (cf. Norman, 1989). The view that I have argued for throughout this thesis, sees the desirability of egalitarian social relations residing in their contribution to realising the non-instrumental value of social agency. Our claims to egalitarian social relations are thereby grounded in our interests in exercising agency socially. Likewise, then, we may hold that social agency is the comprehensive value on which our liberal claims to egalitarian social relations are based. This is further supported by the background account of well-being that I was working with in earlier chapters, too. The view that I assumed there naturally leans toward an objective (list) theory of well-being, not hedonist or preference satisfaction theories. It thus seems that we have been operating with a comprehensive liberal understanding of our claims to egalitarian social relations. A view that grounds it in a comprehensive and (potentially) controversial moral and social ideal.

That said, though, I believe drawing such a conclusion is premature. There are several reasons for thinking that a non-comprehensive reading of those claims is possible or even more plausible: note, first, that a view that builds on the value of exercising agency is relevantly 'thinner' than, like in the Razian variant of liberalism, one grounded in the ideal of personal autonomy. Such autonomy is, as I have argued in Chapter 2, an 'excellent kind' of the broader notion of agency. To ground the agency view, fewer (if any) perfectionist judgments are necessary. The value of agency does not appeal only to particular conceptions of the good, nor does it, for that reason, pick out a specific

comprehensive doctrine. To claim some fundamental value in the exercise of agency, social or individual, seems to me to be rather uncontroversial. Agential pursuits have this value after all, so I have claimed, because they allow for the self-directed development of a coherent and stable conception of ourselves over time, through the projects and relationships to which we commit ourselves. As such, they are the precondition for substantive conceptions of the good in the first place. This broader view is close to the view that G. Dworkin ascribes to Mill; that there is independent value in choice itself: ‘to be able to choose is a good that is independent of the wisdom of what is chosen’ (Dworkin, 1972, 72). That is a vision more akin to Rawls’s (1993) notion of political autonomy; one that we can articulate in non-comprehensive terms, unlike the ‘thicker’ value of (Razian) personal autonomy.

Moreover, an ideal, even if presented in a comprehensive fashion, might also be reformulated and captured in uncontroversial terms. It may very well be possible, for the reasons cited above, that we can ‘launder’ notions, such as social agency and egalitarian social relations, as Clayton (2016) puts it, and present them as free-standing ideals. For this, we have to appeal to public or political reasons only. Reasons that are implicit in the public political culture, drawn from public values and public standards (cf. Wenar, 1995). Can we refashion the ideal of social agency in such a way? I believe the short discussion above supplies good reasons to think so. The notion of agency and our interests in social commitments that I have appealed to throughout this thesis plausibly flow from an understanding of seeing and recognising ourselves and others as free and equals. For support to this understanding, we can draw on the public political culture of liberal societies. Thus, the concept of social agency seems to meet the requirements for such a political ideal.

This non-comprehensive interpretation of our claims to egalitarian social relations has another source of support as well. As some have observed over the recent past (see e.g. Joyce, 2020; Kolodny, 2018; Neufeld, 2020) the project of relational egalitarianism and the idea of political liberalism appear to share certain motivational and aspirational elements. Both approaches are, in

a specific and similar sense, concerned with what we can reasonably ask or demand of others, given our diversity and differences in opinion on matters of the good. Their emphasis on the notion of people's equal civic status (see Cass, 2021/2025) recognises and enshrines a requirement of mutual civic respect (see Schouten, 2019) for the features of societies marked by reasonable pluralism. To relate to others as equals, and justify our societal ideals and the 'currency' of justice in neutral ways are arguably expressions of similar notions of respect (see Carter, 2011; also van Wietmarschen, 2021). It is thus not unreasonable, I believe, to assume that both projects may be built on the same, deeper moral principle. They might be the two sides of the same moral outlook-coin, so to speak. I do not have the space to defend an explicit view of the relationship between these two substantive projects in contemporary political philosophy here. But whatever the actual relationship turns out to be, the likelihood that there is a significant one does give us some reason for thinking that our claims to egalitarian social relations can indeed plausibly be interpreted in a political-liberal fashion, as a non-comprehensive ideal with anti-perfectionist implications.

This adds further credibility to favouring a non-comprehensive over a comprehensive understanding of these egalitarian claims, albeit this does not decisively rule out a comprehensive liberal defence of such claims. While it thus requires further argument to show downstream which view we should ultimately favour, it nevertheless reveals that these claims are consistent both with comprehensive anti-perfectionism and political anti-perfectionism. I do think that we can pause here for the moment being, however, because the comprehensive/ non-comprehensive axis is not the (only) crucial point of interest for us here⁶¹. Arguably, especially relevant for addressing the liberal worries outlined at the beginning of this chapter, is the question of whether the account has (anti-)perfectionist implications – whether or not the state is justified in promoting or discouraging certain ways of life on the grounds of some ideals.

⁶¹ That said, it is an interesting point, because, as I argued above, some of the resulting positions are more plausible than others and as such, it would be at least *prima facie* strange if the account turns out to be e.g. a non-comprehensive but perfectionist view.

In regard to this second axis of perfectionism/anti-perfectionism, the situation is initially similar to before. The same intuitions and considerations that motivate the comprehensive liberal reading of our egalitarian claims suggest a perfectionist understanding of justified state action. If liberal claims to egalitarian social relations are justified through a comprehensive ideal, perfectionism is a natural answer, permitting the state to promote those social relations through policies and the law. But then again, note that the value of agency that underlies egalitarian social relations gives us strong anti-perfectionist reasons, too. It is the very value of agency itself that implies a certain notion of non-interference. We have reasons to promote people's capacities to exercise agency and give due respect to individuals as social agents because we ought to recognise their agential sphere (cf. Chapter 4). But we should reasonably do so without telling people in substantive and controversial ways which specific good, egalitarian relation(ship) they should aspire to and how they should reach them. Recognising others as social agents and promoting egalitarian relations that nurture their agential capacities can and, I think, should be done without further perfectionist judgments about what specific goals and relationships should be pursued or which means should be taken up in these pursuits. This should be left to individual agents themselves, as a genuine part of what the exercise of agency requires. In that sense, I believe that the same value that grounds our liberal claims to egalitarian relations entails that the state ought not to promote or discourage any particular activities, ideals, or ways of life for further perfectionist reasons. This anti-perfectionist understanding of our egalitarian claims is, I argue, preferable to the perfectionist reading. It stays closer to the value at the heart of these claims.

This leaves us then with two viable options for judging the liberal credentials of our claims to egalitarian social relations. Comprehensive anti-perfectionism and political anti-perfectionism are both consistent with our egalitarian claims. Both assume that however the fundamental ideal is articulated, our egalitarian claims should be vindicated in an anti-perfectionist liberal conception. They are best defended as a part of a conception of justice that does not permit the state to

encourage certain ways of life. While we have reason to think that the eventual choice between those two positions should be made on further, independent grounds (as noted above), we can point to some of the implications that choosing one or the other has: settling on the former of the two options, means we are closer to how egalitarians have traditionally thought about social equality. Namely, as a thicker moral and social ideal. However, if we follow more closely the notion that I have suggested as ultimately underlying such social equality – social agency – then we are better advised, I think, to settle on fully political liberal grounds. As this fundamental value of exercising agency socially can be defended by reference to public reasons, as a free-standing conception. This then construes the resulting ideal of social equality in a fairly abstract and thinner sense. A move, which deprives us of some resources that egalitarians historically have cited to make the case for the moral goodness and desirability of social equality. But taking this cost is decently compensated by the resulting ability to make social equality appealing to more or, in fact, any reasonable liberal person⁶². If enjoying egalitarian social relations is a plausible part of political liberal justice, then we may eventually be able to persuade many more people to care about social hierarchies than what is usually assumed. This, I argue, we should see as an advantage of the substantive conception of claims to egalitarian social relations put forward in this thesis.

6.2.2 Liberal egalitarian social relations and the site of justice

With that, we have eventually arrived at a substantive liberal conception, which is consistent with our claims to egalitarian social relations and on which those can plausibly justified as part of liberal justice. This is a decidedly anti-perfectionist, tentatively non-comprehensive liberal view. Now, such a view has certain other implications for our thinking about liberal egalitarian justice, too. Its

⁶² Moreover, it avoids having to confront another urgent objection that haunts only comprehensive anti-perfectionists, which Quong (2011) puts as follows: “Once liberalism is tied to some specific views about the good life, the liberal state will unavoidably be acting for perfectionist reasons: it will be making decisions about what should be legal and illegal, what is just and what is unjust, based on a particular thesis about what adds inherent or intrinsic value to a human life.” (Quong, 2011, 25). This, potentially decisive, rebuttal to an anti-perfectionist stance is one that we are then spared from.

anti-perfectionist stance sets constraints on the requirements of distributive justice. For example, whichever specific view we lean towards the question of the metric of distributive justice – whether we think that social primary goods, resources, welfare, or capabilities are the correct currency of justice (cf. Brighouse & Robeyns, 2010) – this question cannot be settled through perfectionist argument. *Nota bene*, we are still able to confidently decide on e.g. a resourcist view, but what we cannot do, is reach a decision by reference to perfectionist judgements about what constitutes a flourishing life.

Similarly, these constraints carry over onto questions of the scope and sites of justice as well. These are *inter alia* questions about to whom rights and duties of justice fall. Although often conflated, these two questions are not coextensive:

“The site of justice is not the same as its scope: the site of justice refers to the kinds of objects (individuals’ actions, individuals’ character, rules, or institutions, and so on) appropriately governed by principles of justice, that is, to which the principles of justice rightly apply, whereas the scope refers to the range of persons who have claims upon and responsibilities to each other arising from considerations of justice.” (Abizadeh, 2007, 323)

While the question of the scope of justice regarding our claims to egalitarian relations remains an important one, the particularly relevant for us is the question about the site(s) of justice. That is, the question of what the ‘primary subject’ of justice is (Tan, 2012, 1); is whether principles of justice apply to institutions, individuals, or both. To be sure, it is quite indisputable that individuals have some duties of justice. Not committing fraud, doing one’s fair share in a joint project, and not discriminating among applicants as an employer certainly are among the general⁶³ duties of justice that individuals have (see Miller, 2025). Yet, the concrete questions for us here are whether individuals have more extensive duties beyond that, to actually promote social justice themselves, and, if so, whether the state is permitted to enforce⁶⁴ those duties.

⁶³ See the Rawlsian account of natural duties of justice (cf. Rivera-Castro, 2015).

⁶⁴ Compared to demanding a duty, I adopt Eskens’s (2024) general understanding of enforcing a duty as “[...] a way of pressuring (or attempting to pressure) a person to satisfy their duty, but here the pressure consists in the use of

Above, I have alluded to the standard liberal view that is institutionalist about these questions. That is a view according to which principles of justice apply primarily to institutions and to individuals' behaviour only derivatively. So is, for example, Rawls's influential (1971) account, which attributes those duties to the basic structure of society. This is "the network or system of institutions, taken as a whole and in dynamic relation to one another, that forms the institutional background within which individuals and associations interact with one another" (Reidy, 2014). Rawls's institutionalist view is supported by several different rationales, as Abizadeh (2007) argues. One may justify it by thinking that a) institutions determine and regulate the fundamental terms of social cooperation, b) institutions have a profound and pervasive impact on individuals' lives, or c) institutions subject persons to coercion (see Abizadeh, 2007, 319f.). But such a view might also be defended specifically on grounds of its liberal merits of restraint: because charging only institutions with these duties of justice refrains from overly intervening in or intruding onto individuals' lives. By focusing on institutions, the state puts less demands on individuals themselves. Justice can be served, with individuals largely being able to go about as they wish in their private lives, within the constraints of just institutions – that is, without tasking individuals heavily to promote social justice in their pursuits of the good. The institutionalist answer towards liberal egalitarian justice is thus presumably an anti-perfectionist one because it does not meddle with individuals' pursuits of the good. It does not require us to privately reorient ourselves and subject our plans for our careers, hobbies, and leisure time to principles of justice. Leaving individuals to their private pursuits and seeking to enforce justice through institutions is closer to the anti-perfectionist idea of neutrality than presupposing a certain ideal of individual behaviour. Or so the thought is.

But is an appropriately demanding liberal conception of justice only compatible with such an institutionalist approach towards the site of justice? This we would deem potentially threatening to the validity of our egalitarian claims, on pain of risking inconsistency. After all, egalitarian relations

compulsion, such as physical force, deception, or coercion" (Eskens, 2024, 206). Coercive enforcement by the state is the primary but not sole focus here.

certainly require some personal adjustments from individuals. As I have argued before, to regard someone as an equal does call for egalitarian dispositions and attitudes in individuals. Moreso, as our claims to egalitarian relations do apply in close, personal social relationships as well as in societal relations, they seemingly do presuppose substantive duties of that nature for individuals at least in certain social contexts. And since we think of these claims as normatively weighty and stringent, we will want at least for some of them to be also justice-relevant or -apt. There would thus be a tension between the legitimate demands of liberal justice and our egalitarian claims from this perspective. Those concerns notwithstanding, I believe there are reasons to think that a suitable liberal framing of these social egalitarian demands can, in principle, allow for a broader view of the site of justice.

One such reason for that is the fact that individual duties to promote justice are conceivable without necessarily furthering perfectionist considerations. There is room for some degree of non-institutionalism about the site of justice because individuals' actions can be thought to be the subject of considerations from egalitarian justice that way. After all, the conception of our egalitarian claims plausibly is, as I have shown above, non-comprehensive and free-standing. Liberal social equality in close, personal relationships, in our sense, is not a controversial ideal. A fully political liberal understanding of our egalitarian claims can dismiss some worries about enforcing egalitarian justice being objectionably perfectionist.

Furthermore, while proposing a non-institutionalist aspect of justice requires a certain motivational component (cf. Albertsen, 2019), one that the standard liberal case rejects, as political liberals we can justify this to our (reasonable) co-citizens. The justification of claims to egalitarian relations draws on public or political reasons, after all. It is also helpful to recall here from earlier chapters (specifically, Chapter 4) that the attitudinal or dispositional requirements for egalitarian social relations are not exceedingly costly to individuals, too. It is both feasible and reasonable to ask others to update their beliefs, hold others in equal regard, and treat others as equals, at least on the

relevant dimensions of social consideration. For that reason, having the state enforce these claims should then also be considerably less controversial. The kind of egalitarian social ‘ethos’ that this implies, is qualitatively different from how some theorists think of such an ethos about the just distribution of (positions of or material) advantages (see Cohen, 2008), or the limits thereof (see Holt, 2011). Consequently, liberals in general should find it easier to accept a motivational component in the requirements of that type of egalitarian justice.

Additionally, note that allowing for some degree of non-institutionalism about the site of justice is not to dismiss others or assign priority to them over institutionalist requirements. Our claims to egalitarian social relations plausibly have strong institutionalist implications, too. Both formal and informal social institutions, and how they work, are among the crucial instruments for maintaining social (in-)equality. Realising claims to egalitarian relations as a matter of justice thus surely operates on an institutional level as well. Given the pervasive impact of such institutions, it is not unreasonable to assume that they might be even more important from the point of view of justice, than individual transactions. This is to say that anti-institutionalism, the rejection of institutions for the site of justice, is generally an untenable view from the perspective of our egalitarian claims. Accepting some elements of non-institutionalism, however, allows us to better address the shortcomings of formal institutions in enforcing egalitarian justice as well as those of informal institutions that we usually deem beyond our grip. Just as feminist theorists have argued for decades (see Okin, 1989), the ‘personal is political’. Or more accurately, the borders between the personal and the political are in constant flux and where we draw the line is subject to negotiation (cf. also Shapiro, 2016, Ch.1). Social institutions such as the family can become subject to considerations of justice for social egalitarians, simply because it is there that some objectionable inequalitarian social relations are primarily maintained – a fact that often slips through the cracks of standard liberal egalitarian conceptions of justice.

Thus, this gives us reason to think that the state's enforcement of our egalitarian claims can be justifiable, even if this targets areas that have traditionally been beyond the grasp of the state and even when this places considerable demands directly onto individuals themselves. This, combined with the political liberal grounding of our egalitarian claims, suggests some credibility to adopting a broader view about the site of our preferred account of liberal egalitarian justice. A view that recognises both institutionalist as well as non-institutionalist requirements of just egalitarian relations.

This complements and completes the evaluation of our claims to egalitarian social relations from the perspective of liberal legitimacy and liberal justice. To recap the conclusions, at which we have arrived over the past two sections: first and foremost, I have argued that claims to egalitarian social relations can be part of what we owe to others in a liberal conception of justice. Our egalitarian claims are not only compatible with a liberal account of justice, but also best understood in anti-perfectionist (and, presumably, non-comprehensive) terms. Making sense of these egalitarian claims as demands of justice implies, so I have further claimed, a broad view on the question of the site of justice. Yet, against some *prima facie* liberal worries, I have shown that we have reasons to think that a non-institutionalist enforcement of these egalitarian claims is justifiable and that such a requirement can consistently be incorporated into a plausible political-liberal conception of justice. With that, we are now in a better position to revisit the specific and potentially decisive worries about neutrality – from considerations of illegitimate state paternalism and undue demandingness – that we first identified in the discussions of Chapter 5 and which I have described in detail in section 6.1.

6.3 The concerns about paternalistic state interference and demandingness revisited

Recall from these earlier sections that the specific charges from liberal neutrality were motivated by worries that claims to egalitarian social relations, as I describe them, can only be met by a

perfectionist paternalistic state and only by unduly placing substantive burdens on individuals to promote social justice themselves. So, what does this marriage of anti-perfectionist liberalism and egalitarian social relations entail regarding these worries about neutrality? Let us treat the considerations from state paternalism in tandem with those about undue demandingness.

Approaching this, it is helpful to consult the discussion about liberal and illiberal, justice- and non-justice-based paternalism in the wider perfectionism debate. This is relevant because our claims to egalitarian social relations can, in principle, be met through a variety of paternalist or non-paternalist measures. Illiberal perfectionists accept that the state is always justified to use coercive measures on grounds of perfectionist judgements against citizens for their own good. Against that, liberal perfectionists hold that the state ought not to coerce its citizens for their own good but assume that “the state is often needed to provide conditions for worthwhile lives to flourish” (Chan, 2000, 34, cf. Quong, 2011, 84). Moreover, such liberal perfectionism can be assumed to be justice-based, if principles of justice are arrived at through perfectionist judgments, or non-justice-based if perfectionist judgements are assumed to inform the actions of the liberal state outside its pursuits of justice (see Quong, 2011, 85). Liberal anti-perfectionists, in turn, reject the permissibility of both illiberal and liberal justice-based perfectionism and non-justice-based perfectionist measures alike.

How do our egalitarian claims and their corresponding duties respectively fare on these grounds? As the discussion in the previous section has shown, our egalitarian claims can be captured in political liberal, viz. non-comprehensive and anti-perfectionist, terms. On these grounds, the worry that our claims can only be realised by a perfectionist paternalistic state can be rejected. We can formulate our claims to egalitarian social relations in political terms. Thus, the state, in attempting to meet those claims, does not act on perfectionist judgments about what constitutes a good life, but on requirements for seeing and treating each of its subjects as free and equal. The exercise of coercive state powers for meeting our egalitarian claims is anti-perfectionist, hence satisfying the

relevant neutrality criterion. What about non-justice-based non-coercive perfectionism, though? It may seem that, even after the state has met all concerns of justice, it might still be required to act to tackle residual issues posed by inequalitarian relations in various social contexts. This then could vindicate the worry behind the alleged perfectionist state paternalism.

For this, let us imagine a scenario in which liberal egalitarian justice has been served. The state as the primary agent of justice has enforced our liberal liberty rights, distributed advantages⁶⁵ fairly and has met our claims to egalitarian relations through measures aiming at reforming or abolishing social hierarchies, which we prior have identified as a concern of justice – as detrimental to the standing of free and equals in society. In societal relations, the state makes sure that individuals are recognised and respected with adequate and equal social consideration, and the state has sought to promote individuals' interests in enjoying egalitarian relations by providing opportunities for exercising adequate social agency in closer social relationships (within the bounds of liberal rights). Thus, social egalitarian justice reigns supreme.

That said, we can rather easily imagine some objectionable inequalitarian relations to remain, even after (anti-perfectionist) justice has been enacted. In societal relations, social hierarchies maintained by persistent informal social status norms can slip through the purview of the justice measure of the state. In close, personal relationships, individuals can still lack venues for effective social agency even when the state seeks to provide opportunities. Since, after all, good egalitarian friendships or other similar relationships cannot be created *ex nihilo* and furthermore, because we cannot assume that everyone will be able to make effective use of those (some peculiar characters might just not be desired as friends anywhere). To be sure, the state could tackle those remaining inequalities through further action. It could, for example, interpret our interests in egalitarian relations stronger and seek to lift and retrieve those stuck in objectionable social status hierarchies even when the

⁶⁵ This is to say, the state has followed up on duties of distributive justice. As discussed before (see the Introduction), I remain largely agnostic about the relationship between (egalitarian) distributive justice, its metric, and claims to egalitarian relations (with the exemption being the discussion in section 5.4.).

individuals in question seem problematically attached to the inferior positions that they occupy. Likewise, the state could more strongly seek to create communal avenues into citizens' social lives, so that they would always be provided with actual decent levels of social agency. By that, the state would need to make further substantive, perfectionist assumptions and judgments about the conditions necessary for being an effective social agent as well as about how strong the link between social agency and egalitarian social relations should be interpreted. Measures as these do not strike me as out-front morally atrocious or implausible – on the contrary – but they would move us into the territory of non-justice-based liberal perfectionism, nevertheless.

Now, whether we should make room for such non-justice-based perfectionism in the context of our egalitarian claims will depend on whether these will be necessarily paternalistic. *Pace* Quong (2011), who thinks that all traditional rationales for liberal perfectionism fail, hence that any justice or non-justice-based perfectionism is necessarily paternalistic, I believe that a case for non-paternalism about non-justice-based perfectionist state action vis-à-vis our egalitarian claims can be made. This is because I want to deny what Quong affirms as the general wrong-making feature⁶⁶ of paternalism, namely that such perfectionist state action accords individuals an inferior status (cf. *ibid.*, 100ff.). Any rationale for perfectionist state action must, at least implicitly, so argues Quong, assume that individuals are somewhat incapable of (moral) agency; that they lack the capacities for planning, revising, and pursuing a conception of the good. Yet, in tackling social hierarchies through non-coercive measures, by providing information about arbitrary status norm ascriptions – think, for example, of artificial beauty standards informing one's received esteem – or by seeking to promote individuals' capacities for exercising agency with others through sponsoring certain social activities, I do not think that the state treats citizens with such unequal status. It does not, I think, cast a negative judgment on its subjects about their capacities to realise or actualise their moral powers. On the contrary, it is because the value of agential choice is taken seriously

⁶⁶ I.e. the negative *judgment* that is cast onto the paternalized. Against the prospects of this general view, see e.g. Enoch (2016).

(independently from the chosen ends), that the state seeks through perfectionist, non-coercive measures to put individuals into a position to exercise their agency socially, effectively, and equally.

To be sure, we should favour anti-perfectionist state action, simply because the presumption still is that perfectionism typically is paternalistic. But in the case of our egalitarian claims, we should, so I want to argue, be more tolerant towards non-justice-based perfectionism and concede that some perfectionist, non-coercive state action is permissible because it does not involve objectionable paternalism. So much follows, I believe, from the value of social agency and our claims to egalitarian relations, even within an anti-perfectionist liberal conception. Doing so will not infringe on the political liberal credentials of the justice-based interpretation of our claims but will, so I conjecture, provide some consolation to those traditional social egalitarians who think our conception of liberal justice-based claims to egalitarian social relations too ‘thin’.

Therefore, we can sum up our answer to the worry of illegitimate state interference as follows: non-justice-based liberal perfectionism is, at least sometimes, permissibly justified in order to meet our egalitarian claims – when the use of non-coercive measure by the state can be shown not to involve objectionable paternalism but a commitment to honour the value underlying our claims to egalitarian social relations. The use of justice-based perfectionism, illiberal or liberal, is against that, prohibited for the state (for independent reasons, too) and the political liberal understanding of our claims to egalitarian social relations confirms that.

The issue of justice-based perfectionism, then, is also the cue for engaging with the second worry about demandingness, which addresses a different aspect of liberal justice – its site. As I have shown above, the standard assumption about the site of liberal justice is institutionalist. The principles of justice apply to and constrain the (basic structure) institutions of society, not directly individuals’ actions within the settings embedded in those institutions. Yet, in contrast to that, I have argued that our claims to egalitarian social relations are best thought of requiring us to expand the scope of justice beyond institutions to include non-institutional entities as well. On those

grounds, the principles of justice apply to individuals' behaviour, too. Moreover, I have indicated that these imply duties that go further than individuals' natural duties of justice for bringing about a just institutional order (see Rawls, 2001, 50). Rather, they should be understood as substantive duties to promote relational justice, based on our claims to egalitarian social relations.

Accordingly, this proposal is akin to what Cohen (1997) calls an egalitarian “*ethos* of justice that informs individual choices” (Cohen, 1997, 10). A position that some have labelled ‘trans-institutional’ (cf. Tan, 2012), for it acknowledges institutionalist as well as non-institutionalist sites of justice⁶⁷. Several arguments against non-institutionalist (or even further, anti-institutionalist) views have been established in the literature on theories of justice, based on various, different grounds, notably but not exclusively by concerns of publicity (see Williams, 1998). I shall mention (some of) those objections *en passant* in the discussion below but will focus on the specific worry at hand, namely that introducing a non-institutionalist component to the site of justice unduly puts substantive demands directly on individuals. This is the concern that charging individuals “[...] with further duties to promote justice by acting directly on the relevant principles in their daily lives” (Miller, 2025) is indeed unduly overburdening. As such, this worry is, as I have argued, potentially decisive against our view of seeing claims to egalitarian social relations as a part of liberal justice.

Approaching this concern, we can again draw on our response to the worry about paternalist state interference from above. Our egalitarian claims do not, I have claimed, presuppose or introduce a comprehensive social ideal into individuals' lives. Because of its (presumably) non-comprehensive grounding and anti-perfectionist direction, enforcing claims to egalitarian social relations should not be seen as a paternalistic attempt of the state to advance an ideal of human flourishing through perfectionist judgments. On similar grounds, we can hold that the *prima facie* concern with an

⁶⁷ As indicated before, I use the term ‘non-institutionalist’ to designate those views incorporating both institutionalist and non-institutionalist dimensions to the site of justice.

expansive site of such egalitarian justice is incoherent with our liberal aspirations. Anti-perfectionism about justice does not, in principle, rule out a non-institutionalist view on the site of justice. What matters is that these claims are justifiable to reasonable individuals, that they do not introduce controversial ideals in their lives, not that their corresponding duties ever only fall onto institutions. The thin agency-based background value of claims to egalitarian social relations can meet this neutrality condition. Thus, we can indeed, at least for matters of theoretical consistency, defend such a non-institutionalist view about the site of justice on anti-perfectionist liberal grounds.

This does not preclude that there are other, substantive reasons against accepting such a view. One preliminary, consideration supporting such reasons stems from the aforementioned argument by Williams (1998) (it is preliminary for us here, because the demandingness worry goes beyond Williams' own main concern). In his article, Williams articulates an institutionalist criterion for the site of justice. This is derived from the following line of reasoning: when we assign rights and duties of justice, Williams says, we should not forget about other relevant values, such as efficiency, coordination, and stability. A conception of justice should "enable individuals to realize an ideal of social unity, which Rawls terms well-ordered social cooperation" (Williams, 1998, 244). Yet, when we then think about assigning duties to individuals, for, let's say, their occupational choices, they are faced with certain epistemic limitations. Much of the relevant (economic) information is not publicly available to individuals to make such a considered choice. As individuals, we simply do not (and indeed, cannot) know whether we further justice better by becoming a handyman, doctor, or lawyer, so to speak. The relevant information is not publicly available to us. This problem of publicity shows a defect in conceptions of justice that assign substantive duties directly to individuals. Institutions, on the other hand, are, following Rawls (1971), "a common basis for determining mutual expectations" (Rawls, 2001). This shows that "a society is well-ordered only if regulated by a conception of justice that is both public and stable", and thus, Williams concludes, "we should, like Rawls, favour conceptions whose scope is restricted to publicly accessible

phenomena” (ibid., 245). Hence conceptions that are institutionalist about the nature of the site of justice.

William’s concern with publicity suggests that non-institutionalism about the site of justice misses a ‘fact of limited information’ and therefore does not alleviate realising social unity in society. Moreover, attributing substantive duties to individuals and enforcing these through the state, overburdens individuals in a sense – as they are charged with determining themselves how to overcome the problem of ‘collective cognitive limitation’. An issue that cannot be overcome without public institutions helping to regulate our conduct. This is thereby one specific consideration supporting worries about demandingness against non-institutionalist accounts.

Should this concern us for our claims to egalitarian relations as well? We might very well think so at first. However, as the reference to occupational choices above indicates, William’s argument (against Cohen’s notion of the justice ethos) operates primarily in the realm of distributive justice, hence with concerns about the just distribution of positions and material advantages. There is a crucial difference between these distributive requirements and our demands of strictly relational justice though. To effectively discharge our duties corresponding to claims to egalitarian relations, we seemingly do not need institutions to the same extent. It is not unreasonable, I would argue, to assume that establishing and maintaining egalitarian social relations can be comparatively easier achieved even when proper social institutions for collective coordination are lacking. As individuals, we can relate to others as equals by adjusting our beliefs and attitudes towards others. To equally respect others as agents, to recognise their social roles, and to treat our co-citizens as equally authoritative and esteem-worthy does not get us into the exact same problem and thus does not present a similarly decisive obstacle as in the case of occupational choice. Our claims to egalitarian social relations just are not as epistemically demanding in the sense that requirements of distributive justice (typically) are. Distributive justice may rightfully have to operate in the background as procedural justice for those reasons, but this is unlike our claims to an egalitarian

social standing which rightly impose duties to us individuals upfront. Therefore, we likely can reject this first, preliminary consideration from publicity here.

Another, more direct consideration in strict favour of institutionalist approaches to the site of justice comes from Tan's (2012) comprehensive argument on the ground, site, and scope of liberal justice. Tan's starting point is the plausible assumption that individuals will differ in their personal values, especially in liberal societies marked by reasonable pluralism about the good. The institutionalist approach, Tan claims, is better suited to track this value pluralism in individuals' personal lives, by allowing "for a division of moral labour between the demands of justice on the one side, and the demands of personal commitments and ends on the other" (Tan, 2012, 28). People have duties to establish just institutions, but within those, everyone may do as they wish. This corresponds to individuals' two moral powers, as the capacities to form, revise, and pursue a conception of the good, on the one hand, and the capacity for a sense of justice, on the other. The institutionalist approach elegantly confirms this distinction and appropriately balances the demands of justice with the legitimate demands of personal life. The problem with non-institutionalism, for Tan, is that it intrudes into people's personal projects and relationships by insufficiently respecting the value pluralism that is inherent to morality. In his view, assigning substantive duties of justice to individuals will necessarily conflict with their legitimate personal pursuits.

This consideration, then, is more akin to our anticipated concern with individual duties to meet claims to egalitarian social relations. Relying on Tan's reasoning, we can formulate it as follows: charging individuals with duties of social egalitarian justice – to pay egalitarian recognition respect to other agents' statuses and to equally promote the social agency capacities of our near and dear ones – intrudes into the personal sphere of individuals and will conflict with their legitimate personal pursuits that are motivated by values other than that of egalitarian relations. People will not be able to follow up on their individual goals when their actions are constrained by egalitarian

duties of justice. Enforcing individuals' egalitarian claims and duties by the state is overdemanding in this sense.

It is questionable whether the objection in this form has the relevant traction though. Taking individual duties from claims to egalitarian social relations seriously will certainly rule out some personal pursuits – those that violate any requirements from moral permissibility in general – but does it unduly limit the scope of individual actions and necessarily conflict with specific, legitimate ends? It is difficult to see how enforcing our claims on an individual level will necessarily clash with individuals pursuing their private ends. It may or may not. Schouten (2019) argues, against a similarly-motivated concern, that the project of political liberalism

“generates positive requirements and negative constraints on the legitimate use of political power. Negatively, the state must avoid intrusions into people's lives that can be justified only by appeal to values that citizens may reasonably reject. Positively, the state must ensure for citizens access to the necessary means for the development of their moral powers as well as adequate space in which that development can occur.” (Schouten, 2019, 133)

As I have already established, we can justify the claims to egalitarian social relations to reasonable people. Hence the negative requirement is fulfilled. Understanding the enforcement of our egalitarian claims furthermore in terms of this positive sense, as of providing equal access and space to exercise one's agency, shows that Tan's intrusiveness argument has considerably less appeal with regard to this aspect. Individuals will very likely be in a position to pursue their particular, permissible ends. Realising our egalitarian claims through the state should rather be seen as giving contextual support to people's capacities to pursue their conceptions of the good with others. What we have reason to do, when these egalitarian duties are demanded of us by the state, should thus not overly limit the scope of our own pursuits. While there is some potential for conflict, I believe in this case this does not have as grave consequences, in terms of the costs that individuals have to bear, as feared. This lets us dispel some falsely assumed notions of demandingness based on an intrusiveness concern.

Ultimately, this might, however, also depend on our assumption about the features of the value pluralism that will in fact exist in a well-ordered liberal society. That is, whether people's actual substantive conception of the good, will indeed be diametrically opposed to respecting and acknowledging others' equal interests in social agency. So, instead of dismissing all conflicts here, for which I lack the space, I believe a better way forward is to consider one such relevant case and evaluate whether this shows, overall, that the recommended solution is reasonably acceptable and plausibly costly to individuals, or not.

Let us thus consider one's individual duties (from these egalitarian claims) vis-à-vis social status-based hierarchies. Such informal hierarchies are a typical obstacle to realising social egalitarian justice. Assuming that individuals have substantive duties to promote justice, one has a reason for action to combat social settings that maintain such hierarchies, even when those very hierarchies enable us to pursue certain personal ends. For example, imagine that, as a byproduct of inhabiting a certain socially ranked social role, we regularly gain some, usually trivial but unjustified nevertheless, socially salient benefits. Let's say, being treated more leniently by the police in situations when others would be fined for speeding or charged for expired parking tickets. This, we imagine, is something we came to value deeply. We might also care that our superior social role position is abolished or reformed, acknowledging that this is what justice requires, but we still maintain that this responsibility falls to the institutions of the state, not to us directly. For that reason, we do not think it legitimate for the state to attempt to enforce on us individual duties to comply with others' egalitarian claims and act up against such preferential treatment (and thus, in effect, act against our role-based interests). This would be an instance of such a conflict between individual duties of justice and the pursuit of our legitimate personal ends. Arguably, the nature of this example is also not too far-fetched but an enduring feature in many of our social lives.

Should we concede to the complaints about demandingness in our personal pursuits? I don't think so, but instead believe that we have the resources to take away the edge of this objection here.

These, again, lie in the underlying value of our egalitarian claims. Our fundamental concern with egalitarian relations is that individuals are in a position to exercise their agency well with others, to pursue their goals and relationships in social settings. Note that Tan himself recognises that

“Individual personal pursuits, as we may call them, are not limited to asocial private goals but include a range of socially shared ends and associational commitments and can be other-regarding as well, such as those ends and commitments having to do with familial relations, friendship, and so on.” (Tan, 2012, 26)

The social dimension of many personal pursuits is prevalent. As such, the same concern that drives the objection again also supports the rationale for our egalitarian claims. Saying that some personal commitments may be constrained by duties of duties, is here to acknowledge the legitimate interests of others’ personal pursuits. This follows from consistency. After all, enjoying the benefits of inequalitarian relations in our personal spheres still comes at the cost of others, whose interests in having adequate social agency are neglected (recall the reference to feminist analyses of the social institution of the family). The benefits that one’s superior social role unjustly accrues, as in the example above, will be to the detriment of others’ scope of agency. What is within the bounds of justice is determined by a variety of morally relevant considerations.

As indicated above, political liberals, are also not fated to accept adequate protection from outside interference as justifiable only. Schouten emphasises that the same political liberal concern with individuals’ moral powers and acting on conceptions of the good sometimes

“will lead citizens to *accept* political interventions, or even *demand* them. Citizens may, for example, call upon the state to intervene in the workplace to protect against oppressive exercises of power by employers, or within the family to protect children against certain harmful parenting behaviours.” (Schouten, 2019, 133)

This, I think, speaks for the reasonableness of asking others to accept, on the basis of duties of egalitarian justice, having some constraints enforced on their personal pursuits. This is not to deny or downplay the facts of value pluralism and reasonable disagreement about the good, but calls for a firm attitude to respect and promote equally everyone’s interests in committing to personal

projects and relationships. After all, egalitarian relations benefit everyone's interests in social agency and make people's lives better by situating them in positions where they can more effectively follow through on their personal ends in the first place. This might require adjustments of some conceptions of the good, but only those that outright deny others' agency interests. Thus, while this enforcement may come at some costs to a few, whose personal ends will be somewhat restrained by duties of justice, I think these are, overall, justifiably on grounds of the contribution this non-institutionalist site makes to the general moral rightness of society. We should, I claim, allow for some justice-based demands in personal spheres because the trade-off is justifiable to reasonable citizens. Not least, because the demands of our claims to egalitarian relations are captured in non-comprehensive terms, which should speak to all reasonable individuals under their purview.

Finally, this answer to the demandingness worry brings forth another reason, one not just to permit non-institutionalism but to actually favour such an expansive position towards the site of justice. This reason is based on considerations about the relationship between the ground of our claims of egalitarian justice (viz., why social relations ought to be egalitarian) and the site (viz., to which agents and entities the principles of justice apply). These namely do feat together neatly: the exercise of social agency, which is promoted by egalitarian relations, is primarily a matter and value in interpersonal actions (especially in close, personal relationships). Our individual actions, attitudes, and dispositions are directly relevant to realising that value. On those grounds, it only makes sense to identify individuals as agents of justice as well, whose actions are subject to principles of justice, and who ought to be charged with realising justice too. The ground and site of egalitarian justice are thus appropriately linked, their relationship is not just one of consistency but one of stronger theoretical and normative coherence. This adds to our reasons for accepting that our egalitarian claims can legitimately be enforced on individuals by the state.

This further supports and confirms our tentative case for a broad view on the site of justice, one that accepts as a non-institutionalist component that individuals' actions are also subject to principles of egalitarian justice. With that, I claim, the considerations behind the worry about demandingness disperse and our claims to egalitarian social relations are vindicated as a legitimate part of what we owe to each other as a matter of justice. This completes the main argument of this chapter and, in fact, brings this thesis' part on the justification of egalitarian social relations to a close.

To summarise this chapter's results: I have first described in section 6.1. how a principle of state neutrality sits at the heart of much of contemporary liberal theory, one that has or is often taken to be in *prima facie* conflict with an ideal of social equality. Against that, I have argued that egalitarian relations can be part of a liberal theory of justice if social egalitarian demands are interpreted in a thinner sense, as the recent contemporary relational egalitarian project has attempted to show (cf. Schemmel, 2021). That said, I acknowledged that, in general, the burden of proof lies with anyone defending such a theory, showing that the liberal neutrality conditions can be met, and, specifically for our case, that the liberal worries that emerged in the discussion of competing reasons to advance our interests in egalitarian relations in Chapter 5 need to be taken seriously. To engage with this task, I have shown that while our claims to egalitarian social relations seem at first glance to presuppose a thicker, social ideal, they can be defended on political liberal grounds, that is, within a non-comprehensive, anti-perfectionist liberal theory of justice. This liberal understanding of these claims allowed us to reject the first liberal worry about undue perfectionist state paternalism. Beyond that, I suggested that the second liberal worry about (over-)demandingness is best framed as a debate about the proper site of liberal justice, that is, the question of to which agents and entities the principles of justice rightfully apply. Against the standard, institutionalist approach in much of liberal egalitarian theorising, I argued in favour of a broader, non-institutionalist account that recognises individual behaviour as equally subject to egalitarian demands of justice. Permitting

the state to enforce these claims is, I have claimed, reasonable to ask of our co-citizens and offers the best, coherent description of the demands of our egalitarian claims as part of a liberal theory of justice. By that, the second worry, that duties corresponding to these claims are unduly demanding of individuals can be refuted. Our claims to egalitarian social relations thus emerge vindicated against these potentially decisive objections. Taking the conclusions from the arguments of the previous chapters into account as well, these claims are therefore, I conclude, overall justified in the liberal state.

CONCLUSION

Throughout these six chapters, I have sought to shed light on different aspects of the idea of egalitarian social relations. Let me recapitulate and summarise the main findings of this dissertation before I offer some concluding remarks on the state of the general theory developed in this thesis, where the main argument leaves us, and which questions remain to be addressed in future research endeavours.

Chapter 1 explored the different ways in which we can approach the question of the nature of social relatedness. I argued in favour of a particular non-moralised, one-way account which states that individuals are specifically socially related if, at least, one party is capable of exerting lasting causal influence on the other's conduct. This showed that the scope of social relations extends beyond what is commonly assumed. Moreover, egalitarian social relations are obtained, on this view, when individuals mutually treat and regard each other's social expressions of their agential commitments not only with equal but with adequate social consideration. That is, they treat and regard each other as social agents, who are subject to the same socially significant normative rules and who matter equally and adequately in that regard. This complex account underscores the genuine social dimension of these relations, rendering the account distinct from conceptions of equal basic and distributive equality and giving us a more precise, general understanding than what we so frequently encounter in relational egalitarian theory.

Chapters 2 and 3 examined the significance of egalitarian social relationships. While relational egalitarians often remain vague or ambiguous about the positive dimension of their project, I aimed to uncover the deeper grounds of why we value egalitarian relationships. Drawing on a conception of social agency and a theory of value about the exercise of agency that exists rudimentarily in the philosophical literature, I showed that our social exercises of agency are prudentially valuable. Pursuing our comprehensive social goals, for example, through the social roles we adopt, has both

instrumental value and is valuable in and of itself. Enjoying egalitarian relationships nurtures our capacities for social agency, allowing us to acquire and hone skills, and to develop a self-directed, stable conception of ourselves through the agential commitments they facilitate. Thus, I presented in novel terms that egalitarian social relations have indeed great personal value, by supplying a more thoroughly grounded theory of their moral desirability. This view provides relational egalitarians with more resources to show and convince others why we ought to care about this kind of social relationships and should remain vigilant about social hierarchies.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 assessed the type and weight of normative claims that this evaluative view gives rise to. Understanding these claims through a reasons-based approach, I identified egalitarian reasons for advancing relations of that kind and quality in both close, personal and wide, societal social contexts. My proposal, that these differ in terms of normative force and direction in these contexts, tracks our moral intuitions about what we can reasonably (and feasibly) be asked to provide for others. This gives us a more fine-grained view of these claims, which allows us to discern their validity in the face of competing considerations in favour of permitting inegalitarian relations or tolerating social hierarchies. Showing that, *ceteris paribus*, these do not outweigh or exclude acting on our egalitarian reasons, suggests that our claims to egalitarian social relationships often are all-things-considered justified. And while this discussion brought to light that this view licenses the exercise of coercive state power to enforce these claims, I rebutted liberal concerns that see this as a violation of a principle of state neutrality. The result is a conception of claims that is substantively egalitarian, appropriately scope- and context-sensitive, and consistent with the political liberal project about justice and legitimacy. This was the general gist of the argument in favour of the justification of our claims to egalitarian social relations.

In sum, this dissertation offers a general view on claims to social equality, one that is nevertheless sufficiently detailed to approach particular issues about specific inegalitarian social relations and individual instances of social hierarchies in a productive manner. It advances our understanding of

the positive project of relational egalitarianism, I believe, by allowing us to see more clearly what egalitarian social relationships are, why they often matter to us in distinct ways, and on what grounds we, as individuals, are entitled to them. Anchoring our thinking about egalitarian social relationships to considerations about the value of agency under entrenched social relations provides the solid and comprehensive foundation that the project relational egalitarianism is currently lacking in the literature.

That said, while the arguments about the nature and value of these egalitarian relations are in a sense comprehensive – as I believe that they are self-contained and address the main questions extensively – the argument about their justification arguably is not. The discussions relating to the justification of egalitarian claims, against competing considerations and liberal worries, only touch on some of the relevant and interesting aspects. Three main points stand out that I could not address here, for reasons of space: first, I have not described in detail what the duties corresponding to our egalitarian claims exactly are and to which agents they specifically fall for realising justice. I have only suggested broadening our view on the agents of justice, but for a comprehensive account, further argument is required demonstrating what those claims concretely entail in a just society.

Secondly, and relating to the first point, I have eluded completely to engage with the important and pressing question of how the claims to egalitarian relations and hence this type of relational justice relates to other claims of justice in general, and egalitarian distributive claims in particular. I have tried to separate these issues thoroughly, believing that much ink has already been spelt to defend (or dismantle) specific views on the latter subject. For that reason, I opted to take a neutral perspective on this question. Yet, even choosing to commit to this approach arguably already presupposes a substantive position towards these issues – namely that demands of relational and distributive justice are sufficiently independent or complementary, to be treated apart. This unargued premise, however, requires further substantive defence, one that I am unable to give here and one that I remain owing to the concerned reader. In a similar vein, I have not given an explicit

account of how these egalitarian claims relate, relatively, to other considerations of justice and how we should adjudicate between those in cases where their demands clash. That said, I hope that even without such further defence, the argument given in this thesis still has its merits, even if they are conditional on our stance towards those further issues.

Lastly, in addressing primarily the liberal credentials and compatibilities of this theory of claims to egalitarian relations, the discussion about their justification has taken a somewhat limiting focus on domestic justice. The question of the scope of justice, which I have touched on only briefly in a few, sporadic points of the thesis, remains an important one, and one that social egalitarians of any colour arguably should spend more time thinking about. In an increasingly interdependent and interrelated globalised world, normative questions about the international and global implications of social egalitarian demands cannot easily be dismissed. The argument about the value of egalitarian relations developed in this chapter might provide some resources for tackling those hitherto underexplored issues.

Venues for further research on the implications and applications of this approach to egalitarian social relations thus abound. With this outlook in mind, I hope that the thesis at hand contributes to the current, wider scholarly debate about social equality and relational egalitarianism by bringing some of the much-needed clarity to the foundational questions about the abstract nature, value, and justification of egalitarian social relations.

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