

Animals and Relational Egalitarianism(s)

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Abstract: According to relational egalitarianism, a society is just insofar as the relations in that society are equal. Exclusively, relational egalitarians have been concerned with why humans, in particular adults, must relate as equals. This is unfortunate since relational egalitarians claim to be in line with the concerns of real-life egalitarians; but real-life egalitarians, such as vegans and vegetarians, clearly care about injustices committed against non-human animals. In this paper, I thus explore the role of non-human animals in relational egalitarianism. I distinguish four accounts of relational egalitarianism and argue that they differ in what they imply for relationships between humans and animals. Interestingly, it will also become clear that in relational egalitarianism, a relation may not only be unequal or equal; it may also be non-unequal.

Keywords: relational egalitarianism; non-human animals; justice; non-unequal relations

1. Introduction

Relational egalitarianism is a theory of justice according to which what ultimately matters for justice is relations (and not distributions, as distributive theorists of justice would have it). For a society to be just, the relations in that society must be equal, or at least not unequal (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Bidadanure, 2016; Fourie et. al., 2015; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018; Miller, 1998; Nath, 2011; 2020; Scheffler, 2015; Schemmel, 2011; Voigt, 2018; Wolff, 1998).¹ Exclusively, relational egalitarians have been concerned with why humans, in particular adults, must relate as equals. This is unfortunate for (at least) two reasons. First, relational egalitarians argue that it speaks in favor of their theory of justice that it is in line with the concerns of real-life egalitarians—concerns such as oppression and racism (see e.g., Anderson, 1999: 312; Schemmel, 2021: 20; see also Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018: 174). However, real-life egalitarians, such as vegetarians and vegans, clearly care about injustices

¹ There is a relevant difference between the two to which we will return in the next section.

committed against non-human animals. Thus, if relational egalitarianism is to be in line with the concerns of real-life egalitarians, it must have something to say about non-human animals. Second, relational egalitarianism has become a prominent theory of justice in moral and political philosophy. I take it that most people participating in these debates demand of a theory of justice that it has at least something to say on the issue of non-human animals. Thus, if that is not the case for relational egalitarianism, this is a clear deficit of the theory.

In this paper, I thus explore the role of non-human animals in relational egalitarianism.² As we will see, we must be clear on what we mean by relational egalitarianism. I will distinguish four accounts and show that they differ in what they imply for relationships between humans and non-human animals. Interestingly, this is true, on some accounts, even if we assume that humans and non-human animals are moral equals.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section (2), I introduce relational egalitarianism and present two distinctions—one between telic and deontic relational egalitarianism, another between a positive and a negative view—which lead me to distinguish four accounts of relational egalitarianism. In Section 3, I analyze what the four accounts imply for human-animal relations. As part of this, I argue that the distinction between a relation being unequal or equal is not exhaustive in relational egalitarianism. Indeed, a relation may also be non-unequal. Finally, in Section 4, I point to how the analysis of the role of animals in relational egalitarianism may prove instructive in determining the role of (small) children in relational egalitarianism.

2. Relational egalitarianism: Two distinctions

² I am not suggesting that relational egalitarianism is necessarily the best theory to explain the proper treatment of animals. I will explore what relational egalitarianism has to say about relations between humans and animals, but I leave it open, for reasons of space, whether another theory is better equipped to explain the proper treatment of animals. But to determine whether that is the case, we will have to know what relational egalitarianism has to say in the first place. This is the aim of this paper. I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to clarify this.

Relational egalitarianism is a theory of justice according to which people must relate as equals, or at least not as inferiors and superiors.³ Paradigmatic instances of relational inequality include discrimination, domination, racism and sexism. Indeed, relational egalitarians usually motivate their account by pointing to such relationships: “the servant is subordinate to the lord of the manor, the slave subordinate to the master ... the plebian is lower than the patrician, the untouchable lower than the Brahmin ... the paradigms [these examples of inequalitarian relationships] provoke in us a sense of unease” (Kolodny, 2014: 292; see also, e.g., Anderson, 1999; Bidadanure, 2016; Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018). Relational egalitarianism is a plausible theory of justice; a racist society is clearly an unjust society. Interestingly, relational egalitarianism implies that a society in which everyone has (an equal opportunity for) the same amount of resources may be unjust. After all, there may be racism in such a society.

Parfit famously distinguished telic and deontic egalitarianism. According to telic egalitarianism, “it is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others” (Parfit, 1997: 204). It is an axiological view. On deontic egalitarianism, “it is not in itself bad if some people are worse off than others” (Parfit, 1997: 207). On this view, “[w]hat is unjust, and therefore bad, is not strictly the state of affairs, but the way in which it was produced” (Parfit, 1997: 208). Whereas on telic egalitarianism, inequality is bad, on deontic egalitarianism, inequality is unjust (Parfit, 1997: 208). These are different views. It is best illustrated by a case in which an inequality is unavoidable, e.g., inequality created by a natural disaster such as an earthquake. In such a case, since the inequality has not come about through anyone’s wrongdoing, it is not unjust according to deontic egalitarianism. On telic egalitarianism, on the other hand, the inequality is in itself bad even though it is unavoidable (Parfit, 1997: 208). What

³ It emanated originally as a criticism of distributive theories of justice, in particular luck egalitarianism (e.g., Anderson, 1999; for more on luck egalitarianism, see Lippert-Rasmussen, 2015). According to relational egalitarianism, distributive theories of justice are wrong in taking distributions (as opposed to relations) to be what ultimately matters.

is particularly important for our purposes is that, according to Lippert-Rasmussen (2018: 170-172; 2021; see also Tomlin, 2014), this distinction applies to relational egalitarianism:

Telic relational egalitarianism: It is (in itself) good (bad) if (in)egalitarian relationships exist.

Deontic relational egalitarianism: It is morally required that people (not) relate as (un)equals.

Thus, on telic relational egalitarianism, it is (dis)valuable that people relate as (un)equals, whereas on deontic relational egalitarianism, people ought (not) to relate as (un)equals. As examples of deontic relational egalitarians, Lippert-Rasmussen (2018: 171) points to Schemmel and Anderson. Schemmel (2011: 366) says, “the objection to [inegalitarian] relationships is not merely that they are, in some sense, bad for people, but that they constitute unjust treatment.” Similarly, Anderson (1999: 313) says, “[Relational] egalitarians base claims to social and political equality on the fact of universal moral equality.” Telic relational egalitarians include O’Neill (2008: 130), “The existence of these kinds of social relations [egalitarian social relations] should itself be seen as intrinsically valuable, independent of the positive effects that such relations may have for individual welfare”; and Scheffler (2005: 17), “the basic reason it [equality] matters to us is because 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.”

Another distinction pertaining to relational egalitarianism is also relevant for our purposes in this paper. This is the distinction between a negative and a positive view of relational egalitarianism (Tomlin, 2014). The negative view points to the badness/injustice of inegalitarian relations whereas

the positive view points to the goodness/justice of egalitarian relations. These views are different.⁴ Suppose there is an inegalitarian relationship. On the negative view, we have two options: we may either end the relationship or make it egalitarian (Tomlin, 2014: 159). On the positive view, we only have one option: we should make the relationship egalitarian. The quotes by O’Neill and Scheffler mentioned in the previous paragraph express the positive view, e.g., O’Neill says that egalitarian relations are intrinsically valuable. Scanlon (2003: 204) expresses the negative view, saying, “it is an evil for people to be treated as inferior, or made to feel inferior. Social practices conferring privileges of rank or requiring expressions of deference are objectionable on this ground, for example.”⁵

These distinctions—the distinction between telic and deontic relational egalitarianism, on the one hand, and the negative and the positive view, on the other hand—cut across each other. This means that we may distinguish four different accounts of relational egalitarianism:⁶

Table 1. Four accounts of relational egalitarianism⁷

| | Telic Relational Egalitarianism | Deontic Relational Egalitarianism |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The Negative View | Inegalitarian relationships are bad (<i>Negative Telic Relational Egalitarianism</i>) | It is a moral requirement that we do not relate as unequals (<i>Negative Deontic Relational Egalitarianism</i>) |

⁴ As Tomlin (2014: 159), points out, it is often not clear whether relational egalitarians support the negative or the positive view: “In general statements of the position they will often focus our minds on equal social relationships and their importance, but in their arguments they will often focus on the *badness* of inegalitarian social relations.”

⁵ So does Scheffler (2005: 19), “inegalitarian societies [which are inegalitarian in the sense that relationships are inegalitarian] compromise human flourishing; they limit personal freedom, corrupt human relationships, undermine self-respect and inhibit truthful living.” See also Tomlin (2014: 159).

⁶ Actually, there is a further distinction which is relevant to negative and positive telic relational egalitarianism. This is the difference between claiming that (in)egalitarian relationships are *personally* or *impersonally* good (bad) (Tomlin, 2014: 160). The claim by Scanlon (2003: 204), that “it is an evil for people to be treated as inferior”, points to the personal disvalue of inegalitarian relations, whereas the claim by O’Neill (2008: 130), that “the existence of [egalitarian social relations] should itself be seen as intrinsically valuable, independent of the positive effects that such relations may have for individual welfare”, points to the impersonal value of egalitarian relations. To keep matters somewhat simple, I will assume that negative and positive telic relational egalitarianism take (in)egalitarian relationships to be both personally and impersonally (dis)valuable.

⁷ Note that this is an analytical framework for understanding relational egalitarianism. I am not arguing that there are actual relational egalitarians in every box (although I suspect that this is the case).

| | | |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The Positive View | Egalitarian relationships are good (<i>Positive Telic Relational Egalitarianism</i>) | It is a moral requirement that we relate as equals (<i>Positive Deontic Relational Egalitarianism</i>) |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

As we will see, these accounts of relational egalitarianism provide different answers to how we should relate to non-human animals, even if we assume that humans and animals are moral equals.

3. Relational Egalitarianisms and Animals

In this section, I will analyze what the four accounts of relational egalitarianism identified in the previous section entail for how humans and animals should relate to each other. In other words, I will explore the role of animals on relational egalitarianism.

3.1 Negative Telic Relational Egalitarianism and Animals

Let us start with Negative Telic Relational Egalitarianism, i.e., the view according to which inegalitarian relationships are bad. What I will do is to look to the reasons that relational egalitarians have put forward as to why inegalitarian relationships between humans are bad to see if they also apply to relationships between humans and animals. If they do not, we may, according to this account of relational egalitarianism, conclude that inegalitarian relationships between humans and animals are not bad. If, on the other hand, (some of) the reasons do apply to relationships between humans and animals, that would not be the case. In that case, we would have some reason, from the perspective of Negative Telic Relational Egalitarianism, to avoid inegalitarian relationships between animals and humans.⁸

One reason why inegalitarian relationships are bad, Scanlon says (2003: 204), is that “it is an evil for people to be treated as inferior, or made to feel inferior.” It is an evil because it leads to

⁸ As we will see, we will have to qualify this statement a bit.

stigmatizing differences in status, with “damage to individuals’ sense of self-worth” (Scanlon, 2003: 212). We can easily see how this could be the case in relationships between adults. The inequality between a black and a white person in a racist society may lead to the black person devaluing their self-worth (cp. Hojlund, 2021). It is hard to see that a relational inequality between humans and animals with animals standing as inferiors would lead to damages to animals’ sense of self-worth, primarily because animals are not self-conscious in the way that is required to be concerned about one’s self-worth in the first place (in the way that relational egalitarians care about).⁹

However, suppose instead that a person stood as an inferior in relation to an animal, e.g., a bear, which is, at least in principle, possible. If standing as an inferior leads to “damage to individuals’ sense of self-worth”, this may lead to the person devaluing their self-worth (in the same way that it would if they stood as an inferior in relation to a human). One may challenge this by saying that it is only if a human stands as an inferior in relation to another human that it leads to damages to their self-worth. However, we may wonder why that would be the case. It cannot be due to moral status. Either humans and animals are moral equals, or humans have a higher moral status than animals (cp. Kagan, 2019). If the former, in both the human-human and the animal-human case, the person would stand as an inferior despite their moral equality. So there is no reason why, in terms of moral status, the one relation should lead to damages to the individual’s self-worth but the other should not. If the latter is the case, we should expect it to lead to larger damages to the person’s self-worth to relate as inferior to an animal than to another human, given the assumption that it is more damaging to one’s self-worth to be inferior to a being with a lower moral status than oneself than to a being with the same (or a higher) moral status (the thought might be, “I’m not even worthy to stand as an equal to an animal”). There may be another reason which could explain the difference for why damages to self-worth only happens to individuals when they stand as inferior to other humans. However, in any

⁹ I say more about this in Section 3.2.

case, in most human-animal relations, it is the animal who stands as an inferior (if anyone stands as an inferior). For this reason, I take it that, in practice, the worry about damage to individuals' sense of self-worth will not be a reason to avoid inegalitarian relationships between humans and animals on Negative Telic Relational Egalitarianism.

However, not only may inegalitarian relations lead to damage to individuals' self-worth. According to Scanlon (2003: 212), they may also do "damage to the bonds between people". As he explains, whereas the former is a loss only suffered by the inferior, in this case it is a loss suffered by both inferior and superior. Insofar as inegalitarian relations do damage to the bonds between people, inegalitarian relations between humans and animals may also lead to damage to the bonds between humans and animals. Compare a companion dog who is raised in a strict hierarchical regime by its human owner with a companion dog who is raised in a less strict, non-hierarchical (or less hierarchical) regime by its human owner, e.g., the latter dog is allowed to run outside whenever it wants whereas the former is not; the latter dog is not beaten if it does not obey whereas the former is, etc. I do not find it hard to believe that the bond between the dog and its owner is stronger, and more valuable, in the latter case than in the former, precisely because the relation is less inegalitarian in the latter case.¹⁰ So this seems to be a reason why inegalitarian relations between (some) animals and humans may be bad.¹¹

A third reason proposed by relational egalitarians as to why inegalitarian relationships are bad is that they lead to less protection of the inferior's interests than an egalitarian relationship would. As expressed by Anderson (2008: 145-146), "To be subject to another's command threatens one's interests, as those in command are liable to serve themselves at the expense of their sub-ordinates." One interest that will be threatened is an interest in freedom. Here I will focus on a theory of option-

¹⁰ This is not to take a stand on whether the bonds in human-human relations can be stronger, and more valuable, than the bonds in human-animal relations.

¹¹ I say some since there are some animals in relation to which humans are incapable of any *basic sociability*, e.g., flies. I return to this point at the end of this section.

freedom according to which freedom is the absence of interference (Berlin, 1969; Miller, 1983; Carter, 1999). This consideration applies to human-animal relations as well. As Taylor (2011: 109; quoted in Schmidt, 2018: 30) explains, “Perhaps the most easily recognized instance of animal’s being unfree is the situation in which it is prevented from moving about in a normal way. Being in a cage, caught in a trap, or chained to a stake would be examples.” The relationship between a dog and its owner is, all else equal, more inegalitarian in the case where the dog is chained to a stake than in the case where the owner lets the dog roam around in and outside the house as the dog wishes (cp. Schmidt, 2018).

This is not to say that necessarily, an inferior in an inegalitarian relationship has less option-freedom than an equal in an egalitarian relationship (think, for instance, of the slave with a benevolent master). But it is to say that there is a strong empirical relationship between relational equality and option-freedom (cp. Schmidt, 2018: 34) such that the more inegalitarian the relationship, the less option-freedom.¹² In that sense, inegalitarian human-animal relationships may be bad because they lead to less option-freedom for animals than would an egalitarian relationship, just as an inegalitarian relationship between two humans may be bad because it leads to less option-freedom for the inferior than would an egalitarian relationship.^{13,14} Clearly, there might be some interests which might be threatened in an inegalitarian human-human relationship which would not be threatened in an inegalitarian human-animal relationship (where the animal stood as an inferior), e.g., an interest in

¹² Cp. “[inequalities] give some people an unacceptable degree of control over the lives of others” (Scanlon, 2003: 205).

¹³ One may object that arbitrary or unnecessary restriction of the dog’s options to roam freely is wrong, but not because it establishes a hierarchy between the human and the dog. It is just wrong because it is an unnecessary restriction of its freedom. The ill-treatment of dogs as most typically understood consists of wrongs that are not distinctively “egalitarian” wrongs. I have the following response. Perhaps not letting the dog roam around freely is not an “egalitarian” wrong, but perhaps it is a “relational” wrong: it is still objectionable because of how it affects the relationship between the dog and its human owner, but it is not because the relationship fails to be egalitarian. The negative relational egalitarian view is able to say that it is a relational wrong (curtailing the dog’s freedom affects the relationship negatively), but not an egalitarian wrong. Also, as far as I can see, the two explanations are not mutually exclusive: not letting the dog roam freely may be wrong both because it is an unnecessary restriction of its freedom and because it negatively affects the relationship between the dog and its owner. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

¹⁴ Option-freedom is just one example of how animals’ interests may be less well served in inegalitarian relationships with humans. Arguably, it may be true of most, if not all, of animals’ interests.

artistic expression, because animals, presumably, do not have such interests. However, this does not change the fact that inegalitarian human-animal relations may be bad because they threaten animals' interests.

Relational egalitarians not only point to the costs of standing as an inferior. There are also costs to standing as a superior. “[Patterns of deference and privilege, i.e., inegalitarian relationships] distort people’s attitudes towards themselves, undermining the self-respect of some and encouraging the insidious sense of superiority in others” (Scheffler, 2005: 19; see also Anderson, 2012: 50; Fourie, 2012: 119-121). For example, to have widespread power over another may lead the superior over time to believe that they actually deserve this power and that they are, in fact, superior to the other. Think, again, of the master who owns their slave. But if it is standing as a superior that leads to this insidious sense of superiority in the superior, it may be that this will also happen if a human stands as a superior in relation to an animal. After all, the power that a human may have over an animal can be identical to the power the master has over their slave. If so, inegalitarian human-animal relationships can be bad because they may lead to an insidious sense of superiority in humans.

Finally, inegalitarian relations create servility and deferential behavior (O’Neill, 2008: 126; see also Hojlund, 2021). It is understandable that standing as an inferior leads to servility and deferential behavior. After all, by being servile and deferring to their master—by making sure they do not act contrary to the wishes of their master—the slave stands, they might reasonably believe, the best chances of avoiding punishment. Indeed, there is a pressure for the inferior to ingratiate themselves with their superior (Pettit, 1997: 87).¹⁵

Arguably, animals may also become more servile by standing in inegalitarian relations with humans (as opposed to standing in no or egalitarian relationships with them). For instance, an elephant

¹⁵ Think also of how women in patriarchal societies might have to “keep their husbands sweet” to avoid being punished by them.

trained in a zoo may be more servile and deferring than a wild elephant. A dog who is continually beaten by its owner for barking may be more servile than a dog who is not because it will become afraid of its owner. Of course, there may be animals for whom this is not true, e.g., that flies stand as inferior, if they do, may not create servility and deferential behavior.

This points to a more general remark. In many of the examples, I have used companion animals, such as dogs, to argue that many of the reasons that relational egalitarians point to in explaining why inegalitarian human-human relations are bad also apply to animal-human relations. But there are clearly animals in relation to which the reasons do not apply, e.g., flies. This points to a precondition which must be satisfied for a “relation” to fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism. The reasons pointed to above do not apply to relationships between humans and flies because we, as humans, are incapable of any *basic sociability* with flies: we cannot get to know them, trust them, or engage in norm-governed cooperation with them. There is not a capacity for shared sociality between us and flies. And such capacity for shared sociality is necessary for the “relation” to fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism. This is why the reasons pointed to above may apply to relations between humans and companion animals such as dogs. In such relationships, there is a capacity for basic sociability.¹⁶

Thus, the arguments in this section must be qualified such that for *some* animals, including companion animals such as dogs, Negative Telic Relational Egalitarianism implies that inegalitarian human-animal relations are bad for (many of) the reasons that inegalitarian human-human relations are bad. Note also, as mentioned earlier, that there are two ways we may remove an inegalitarian relationship on Negative Deontic Relational Egalitarianism: we may end the relationship or make it egalitarian. All else equal, the one is not better than the other. But this also means that if humans are

¹⁶ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this way of formulating the precondition.

not willing to not relate as unequals to animals, it is better, all else equal, that they do not relate at all: that animals and humans become segregated.

3.2 Positive Telic Relational Egalitarianism and Animals

Let us now turn to explore the role of animals on Positive Telic Relational Egalitarianism, i.e., the view according to which egalitarian relationships are good. Of course, some of the reasons investigated in the previous section may also apply to this view in the sense that if relationships are egalitarian, we avoid the bads of inegalitarian relationships.¹⁷ I will therefore not explore these again. However, relational egalitarians have also pointed to reasons as to why egalitarian relations are good.

Some relational egalitarians argue that egalitarian relationships are impersonally good.¹⁸ As O'Neill (2008: 130) explains, "The existence of these kinds of social relations [egalitarian social relations] should itself be seen as intrinsically valuable, independent of the positive effects that such relations may have for individual welfare."¹⁹ For instance, even if, in a sexist society, an inegalitarian marriage would be better for the people involved than an egalitarian marriage, the egalitarian marriage would still be impersonally valuable. If one adopts the view that egalitarian human-human relations are impersonally valuable, it is natural to also adopt the view that egalitarian human-animal relations are valuable. After all, this impersonal value has nothing to do with personal welfare so the fact, if it is a fact, that humans can experience higher pleasures than animals is irrelevant in the present context. Indeed, it is hard to see which (convincing) argument may be given for why egalitarian human-animal relations are not impersonally valuable, if egalitarian human-human relations are.²⁰

¹⁷ Though we must tread carefully here, as I explain later in this section.

¹⁸ Although I did not do so, we might also have discussed a negative version of this argument: that inegalitarian relationships are impersonally bad. If such an argument can be made, such that inegalitarian human-human relations are impersonally bad, it is hard to see why it would not also be the case that inegalitarian human-animal relations are impersonally bad.

¹⁹ As Lippert-Rasmussen (2018: 166) explains, an advantage of this reason is that it allows relational egalitarians to prefer a non-slave society to a slave society even if the latter, for some reason, is better for the people living in that society.

²⁰ Note that it is compatible with this to say that relations between humans may have a higher impersonal value than egalitarian human-animal relations.

Another reason, though not directly proposed by relational egalitarians, is that egalitarian relations may have positive spill-over effects. If humans relate as equals to (some) animals, this may be conducive for them to also relate to other humans as equals. Conversely, if humans relate in an inequalitarian manner towards animals, this may spill over into how they relate to other humans. As Kant said, “He who is cruel to animals becomes hard in his dealings with men” (quoted in Bell and Wang, 2020: 159). Bell and Wang (2020: 160) illustrate this with the following example:

“[S]ocial workers look to the treatment of pets as an indication of a household that is cruel to its human members, especially children. It’s not just a matter of looking for evidence of abused animals. Functional and dysfunctional families have animals at the same rate but with one significant difference: the age of the animals ... If social workers observe that there are new puppies and kittens (and no older animals) every time they visit a home, it is a good indication that cruelty has been inflicted not just against the animals, but also against the humans in the family.”

I am not going to argue that there is a necessary connection between how one relates to animals and how one relates to humans. Whether there is such a connection, or any connection at all, is a question that social scientists are better equipped to explore. But it is at least a plausible hypothesis that how we treat some may spill over into how we treat others. Thus, if we learn to relate as equals to some, this may make us better equipped to relate as equals to others. If this were to be true in some instances in which persons relate as equals to animals, this would be another reason why egalitarian relationships between humans and animals may be valuable.²¹

²¹ Another value of egalitarian relations is that they lead to solidarity (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018: 155; Nagel, 1979: 106). Here, I will not dive into the causal story of why egalitarian relations lead to solidarity in society. Again, social scientists will be better equipped to explore such questions. Instead, I will work with a conditional: if egalitarian human-human relations are conducive to solidarity, it may be that egalitarian human-animal relations are also conducive to solidarity.

So far, we have seen that the reasons why egalitarian human-human relationships are valuable also make it the case that egalitarian human-animal relations would be valuable. However, this in itself does not tell us whether humans and animals can in fact stand in egalitarian relations with each other. All it shows is that *if* humans and animals were to relate as equals, that would be valuable for many of the same reasons that egalitarian human-human relationships are valuable. To determine whether humans and animals can in fact relate as equals, we must know what it takes to relate as equals and see if these conditions can be satisfied in human-animal relations. As Lippert-Rasmussen (2018: 71) explains, “X and Y relate as equals if, and only if:

(1) X and Y treat one another as equals;

(2) X and Y regard one another as equals.”

As he explains, (1) is a behavioural component whereas (2) is an attitudinal component (see also Cohen, 2013: 193-200; Miller, 1998: 224). If, in a society, a black person treats and regards a white person as an equal, but the white person treats the black person as an inferior, they fail to relate as equals. There is, as it were, a *symmetry* inherent in equal relations: it requires that both parties regard and treat the other as an equal. However, this symmetry cannot be established in human-animal relations. Even though the person can treat and regard the animal as an equal, the animal cannot treat and regard the person as an equal (in the way that relational egalitarians care about): animals are not conscious in a way that makes them capable of regarding persons as their equals, let alone treating them in accordance with this (cp. Cohen, 2013: 194; Jaworska and Tannenbaum, 2014).^{22,23} Indeed, as Schmidt (2018: 36) explains, non-human animals do not benefit from the social status of non-

²² Even if a dog were to coincidentally treat its owner as an equal, it would not regard its owner as an equal (and it would not treat its owner as an equal *because* it regards him as an equal, cp. Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018: 71, n. 12).

²³ At least, there is (of yet) no evidence that they can do so (Pepper, 2020: 645).

domination over and above the effects that such a status has on their option-freedom because “they are not cognizant of the legal structure that underlies our relationships with animals.” To illustrate this point, he distinguishes two cases:

Owned Dog: “Hasko the dog is legally owned by Elisabeth. But Elisabeth lets Hasko roam around in and outside the house whenever Hasko wants to. Elisabeth provides Hasko with good-quality food and looks after Hasko’s welfare needs.

Unowned Dog: Hasko the dog is *not* owned by Elisabeth. Elisabeth offers Hasko good-quality food and looks after Hasko’s welfare needs. She lets Hasko roam around in and outside the house whenever Hasko wants to” (Schmidt, 2018: 36)

As he argues, Hasko the unowned dog does not benefit in a way that Hasko the owned dog does not because Hasko is not cognizant of the social relation as such (over and above the effects it has on his option-freedom).²⁴

This points to two interesting upshots. First, we must actually distinguish three, instead of two, ways of describing a relation in relational egalitarianism. A relation may be either *equal*; *unequal*; or *non-unequal*. An *equal* relation is symmetric in the sense that it requires that both parties regard and treat the other as an equal. For a relation to be *unequal*, such symmetry is not necessary: it suffices that one of the parties treats or regards the other as an unequal. But then there may also be the situation in which the relation is *non-unequal*. For instance, in the situation where a person regards and treats an animal as their equal, there may be a non-unequal relation (since none of that which makes a

²⁴ This is not to deny that it may be the case that relations between non-human animals may be equal in at least some sense (cp. Pepper, 2020: 632). I hope to be able to explore this line of argument in future work.

relationship unequal is true of this relationship), but this does not mean that there is an equal relation since the one party cannot treat and regard the other as an equal.²⁵

Second, this means that there is an interesting difference between negative and positive versions of relational egalitarianism.²⁶ Since asymmetry is sufficient for unequal relationships, humans and animals may relate as unequals as long as humans treat and regard animals as their unequals, which means that the disvalue of inequalitarian relationships can be realized in human-animal relations. However, since there cannot be egalitarian human-animal relations because animals cannot regard and treat humans as equals, the value of egalitarian relationships cannot be realized in human-animal relations (as opposed to in relations between adult humans), at least not qua the relationship being egalitarian.

Now, one may object that I arrive at the conclusion that humans and animals cannot relate as equals because I rely on Lippert-Rasmussen's view that relating as equals requires that both parties regard and treat each other as equals. But this, it may be objected, is an asocial and cognitivist view. It is asocial in that it applies as much to idiosyncratic dislikes as to socially sanctioned hierarchies. It has a micro-focus: it is focused on how an individual human treats an individual animal in a particular moment. In that sense, it is not really about roles and relationships at all. It is a cognitivist view in that it shifts the focus away from social practices to individual psychology. Because animals do not have the mental concept of "equal moral status," they cannot relate as equals to humans. One may then say that instead of relying on this understanding, we should adopt one that focuses on equal social status: on how people's social status is shaped by enduring and culturally embedded *social practices*. And this points to another precondition (in addition to capacity for basic sociability) for a "relation" to fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism: it must be an enduring relationship that

²⁵ As we will see, this tripartite distinction is also helpful when it comes to the role of (small) children in relational egalitarianism.

²⁶ It also points to an additional difference between positive and negative views: a society with non-unequal relations is good/just according to a negative view but not according to a positive view.

generate stable socially significant roles and positions. On this view, it may be that relationships between humans and domesticated animals can be egalitarian since the relevant social practices can give equal standing to both parties, and accord equal weight to the interests of both, without according one of them privileges of rank. Moreover, this view seems to be better in line with the original motivations of relational egalitarians which was precisely about the quality of social practices, and in particular whether or how social practices categorized people into social positions.²⁷

Let me start by responding to Lippert-Rasmussen's view being asocial and cognitivist. First, note that the view specifies what it requires to relate *as equals*. It does not say what it takes for a relation to fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism in the first place; that is a different question. So the view can be combined with the view that for a relation to fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism in the first place, it must have sufficient durability (and not be a one-off instant). But I do not think we have to go that way since it is perfectly compatible with Lippert-Rasmussen's view to say that when an inegalitarian relation is part of a social practice, and not merely a one-off instance, this is worse. But this is not to say that it is not bad if, in a one-off instant, a white person shouts racial slurs at a black person. If we choose the social practices view, relational egalitarians cannot qua relational egalitarians object to such instances of racism. Moreover, there is a good reason for why it is a cognitivist view. Consider a strategic racist: a racist who regards black people as morally inferior but treats them as equals to avoid criticism by others (cp. Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018: 72). According to Lippert-Rasmussen's view, the strategic racist fails to relate to black people as equals because he does not regard them as equals. How he regards black people is objectionable. But note that if the social practices view is not cognitive—but is external in the sense that it is about how practices rank and

²⁷ I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

treat people—it cannot capture strategic racists as doing something objectionable. I take it, though, that most relational egalitarians do find strategic racists objectionable.^{28,29}

So I actually think that Lippert-Rasmussen’s view can provide promising answers to the objection raised above.³⁰ But whether we should ultimately choose this view, or the social practices view, is a question that is too extensive for me to tackle in this paper. Thus, I will make my argument in this section, and in the discussion of positive deontic relational egalitarianism in 3.4, conditional:³¹ if we assume Lippert-Rasmussen’s view of what it takes to relate as equals, humans and animals cannot relate as equals.

3.3 Negative Deontic Relational Egalitarianism and Animals

There is not agreement in the literature as to whether humans and animals are moral equals. For instance, Kagan (2019) and Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2014) argue that humans and animals are not moral equals (because humans have a higher moral standing than animals), whereas DeGrazia (1996) and Singer (2009) argue that humans and animals are moral equals.³² Therefore, in this section (and the next), I will have to work with assumptions (since I do not have the space to settle this extensive question in this paper). I will analyze what Negative Deontic Relational Egalitarianism entails both if we assume that humans and animals are moral equals and if we assume that humans and animals

²⁸ But I am aware that some relational egalitarians will not be persuaded by this. They want to maintain that relational egalitarianism only speaks to social practices, and not idiosyncratic behaviors or private beliefs, and that this is in line with the origins of relational egalitarianism. This is why I conditionalize my argument in the next paragraph.

²⁹ There are other challenges for the social practices view. There is a *threshold problem*: how do we determine, in a non-arbitrary way, whether a relation is of sufficient durability to fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism? Second, there is a *difference problem*: if we assume that there is a qualitative difference in the kind of relationship that may exist between two humans and a human and an animal, as I think many people believe, how do we explain this difference if both types of relationships can be egalitarian? Note that on the view that I assume, there is a difference: the former can be egalitarian whereas the latter cannot.

³⁰ Note that it is not only Lippert-Rasmussen’s view. Other relational egalitarians also assume this view, see, e.g., Hojlund (2022: 56); Miller (1998: 224). In fact, Voigt (2018: 441) argues that even Anderson and Scheffler support this view.

³¹ Note that the objection does not challenge what I say in relation to the negative views.

³² For more on the moral status of animals, see e.g., Floris (2021); McMahan (2002); Sebo (2017); Vallentyne (2005); Wendler (2021); Wilcox (2020).

are not moral equals. As we will see, perhaps unsurprisingly, this makes a difference to how humans should relate to animals. More generally, not only does it make a difference whether we are negative or positive relational egalitarians. It also makes a difference whether we are telic or deontic relational egalitarians.

Thus, let us start by analyzing what Negative Deontic Relational Egalitarianism—the view that we should not relate as unequals because it is morally required that we do not—entails for human-animal relations. I will start by assuming that humans and (some)³³ animals are moral equals.

We may start by asking why people ought not to relate as unequals according to relational egalitarians. We ought not to relate as unequals, relational egalitarians argue, because we are in fact moral equals. As Lippert-Rasmussen (2018: 170; see also Anderson, 1999: 313; Kolodny, 2014: 300) says, “As a matter of fact, we are one another’s moral equals and in relating as equals we honour that fact, and this is what grounds the ideal of relational egalitarianism.”³⁴ This is appealing. It implies that racism is wrong because by treating another in a racist manner, the racist relates to the racistee as a moral inferior despite them being moral equals. Similarly, if one human has dominating power over another, they relate as unequals despite the fact that they are moral equals. Thus, according to this argument, moral equals should not stand in an inegalitarian relationship (which fails to respect the fact that they are moral equals): it is unjust if someone relates to a moral equal as a moral inferior (or superior, for that matter). It is easy to see that insofar as humans and animals are moral equals, this argument also applies to such relations. It is unjust if a human treats an animal, e.g., their dog, as their moral inferior—say, by having dominating power over them—because they thereby fail to honour the fact that they are moral equals.

³³ Even on this view, some animals may not be moral equals to humans because they lack the relevant capacities (agency, capacity to feel pleasure and pain, sentience, or whatever grounds moral status).

³⁴ As is clear, this is formulated in positive terms. For our purposes, we can say that in relating as unequals, people fail to honour the fact that they are moral equals.

Another requirement which must be satisfied if one is to not relate to another in an inegalitarian manner is the following:

The Egalitarian Deliberative Constraint: “If you and I have an egalitarian relationship, then I have a standing disposition to treat your strong interests³⁵ as playing just as significant a role as mine in constraining our decisions and influencing what we will do. And you have a reciprocal disposition with regard to my interests. In addition, both of us normally act on these dispositions. This means that each of our equally important interests constrains our joint decisions to the same extent” (Scheffler 2015, 25; cp. Viehoff, 2014: 353).

For instance, if a wife always trumps her husband’s interests, she relates to him as an unequal qua violating the egalitarian deliberative constraint. This means that if a dog owner always, or in most cases, trumps the dog’s interests, to promote their own interests, they violate the egalitarian deliberative constraint and relates to the dog as an unequal. But this is unjust since they thereby fail the requirement of not relating to a moral equal as an inferior. For instance, even though it is inconvenient for them, they might have to come home from work earlier on some days because it is in the dog’s interests to have company. Or they might have to play with the dog, even if they are tired after a long day at work. Or they might have to let the dog roam around the house freely during the night, even if it might disturb their sleep, etc.

Assume, instead, that humans and animals are not moral equals. In that case, there is not a requirement for the person to relate to their dog as an equal since they are, after all, not moral equals.³⁶

³⁵ Interests include needs, values and preferences (Scheffler, 2015: 26).

³⁶ Or at least there is not a requirement grounded in the fact that they are moral equals. Here I am continuing with the argument proposed by relational egalitarians that moral equals should relate as equals because they are moral equals.

In that case, the human does not act unjustly by violating the egalitarian deliberative constraint in their dealings with their dog.

This shows that how humans ought to relate to animals, according to Negative Deontic Relational Egalitarianism, is heavily dependent on whether humans and animals are moral equals. But note that this separates Negative Deontic Relational Egalitarianism³⁷ from Negative Telic Relational Egalitarianism.³⁸ On the latter account, the bads of inegalitarian relationships were, in most cases, not dependent on humans and animals being moral equals. For instance, even if humans and animals are not moral equals, inegalitarian relationships between them may still be disvaluable because they lead to servility, lack of interest protection for the inferior, etc. Thus, even if humans and animals are moral unequals, we would still have reason to avoid inegalitarian human-animal relations according to Negative Telic Relational Egalitarianism. On Negative Deontic Relational Egalitarianism, it makes a significant difference whether humans and animals are moral equals. If they are, there are requirements as to how humans must relate to animals, e.g., that they must not fail to treat them in accordance with the egalitarian deliberative constraint. If they are not, these requirements do not apply. So, whether relational egalitarians are telic or deontic relational egalitarians—and not only whether they support a negative or a positive view—may possibly make a significant difference for how humans and animals must relate.

3.4 Positive Deontic Relational Egalitarianism and Animals

Finally, let us turn to Positive Deontic Relational Egalitarianism, i.e., the view that we should relate as equals because it is morally required that we do so. Again, we will work with two assumptions:

But perhaps this shows that relational egalitarians should come up with an additional argument, not grounded in moral equality, for why inegalitarian relationships are (sometimes) objectionable.

³⁷ And from Positive Deontic Relational Egalitarianism, for that matter, but we are yet to discuss this view.

³⁸ Also from Positive Telic Relational Egalitarianism, but I set this aside since, as we have seen, even if equal human-animal relations would be valuable, they cannot relate as equals.

that humans and animals are moral equals, and that they are not. Let us start by assuming that humans and animals are moral equals. Remember the quote from Lippert-Rasmussen (2018: 170), “As a matter of fact, we are one another’s moral equals and in relating as equals we honour that fact, and this is what grounds the ideal of relational egalitarianism.” Since moral equals should relate as equals, humans and animals should relate as equals. However, assuming that ought implies can, this cannot be true. As we saw in section 3.3, if we assume Lippert-Rasmussen’s view of what it takes to relate as equals, humans and animals cannot relate as equals for the reason that animals cannot regard and treat humans as their equals (but they can relate as non-unequals). But since they cannot relate as equals, there cannot be a requirement that humans and animals relate as equals.³⁹ So, even if humans and animals are moral equals, it is actually not the case that they ought to relate as equals according to Positive Deontic Relational Egalitarianism.

Assuming instead that humans and animals are not moral equals, we also arrive at the conclusion that humans and animals ought not relate as equals. Since only moral equals should relate as equals,⁴⁰ humans and animals ought not relate as equals.⁴¹ This shows that on Positive Deontic Relational Egalitarianism, humans and animals ought not relate as equals, irrespective of whether they are moral equals.⁴²

³⁹ One may wonder whether there are degrees to this question. We can say the same about (small) children, i.e., that they cannot relate as equals to their parents. But is there not a sense in which brattish children who taunt and annoy their parents on purpose view them less as equals than nice children who respect their parents? And might not the same hold for animals? It might indeed be the case that the relationship is more unequal in the case of the brattish children than in the case of the nice children. But that is in line with the argument made here. That the relationship can be more or less unequal does not show that it can be equal. I return to the issue of (small) children in the next section.

⁴⁰ Strictly speaking, this does not follow from the relational egalitarian argument. There may be another reason for why we ought to relate as equals (even if we are not moral equals). I set this complication aside since relational egalitarians have not (yet) come up with such an argument.

⁴¹ Of course, one could supplement Positive Deontic Relational Egalitarianism by adding that if they cannot relate as equals, at least they should not relate as unequals. However, that would still not be a reason why they ought to relate as equals. It would be a reason why they should relate as non-unequals.

⁴² But if animals still have considerable moral standing (although not equal moral standing with humans), perhaps deontic relational egalitarianism still requires that we relate to animals in a way that honors this fact.

4. Concluding remarks

Let me end by noting that this analysis of the role of animals in relational egalitarianism also proves instructive when it comes to another group whose status in relational egalitarianism has yet to be determined, namely (small) children (but see Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018: 121). As we saw, when describing a relation in relational egalitarianism, the distinction between relating as equals and relating as unequals is not exhaustive. Instead, a relation may be either equal, unequal, or non-unequal. (Small) children are similar to animals in the sense that just as an animal cannot regard and treat a human as an equal, for which reason animals and humans cannot relate as equals, a (small) child cannot regard and treat an adult as her equal. Thus, neither is there a requirement that (small) children and adults relate as equals. However, there may still be a requirement to relate to (small) children as non-unequals in which case, in practice, many of the requirements that must be satisfied in order to relate as an equal to another may still apply to how adults ought to treat children according to relational egalitarianism.

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