

## David V. Axelsen and Juliana Bidadanure Unequally egalitarian? Defending the credentials of social egalitarianism

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# UNEQUALLY EGALITARIAN?

*DEFENDING THE EGALITARIAN CREDENTIALS OF SOCIAL EGALITARIANISM*

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## **ABSTRACT**

In his new book, *Luck Egalitarianism*, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen responds to challenges raised by social egalitarians against luck egalitarianism. Social egalitarianism is the view according to which a just society is one where people *relate to each other as equals*, while the basic premise of luck egalitarianism is that it is unfair if people *are worse-off than others through no fault or choice of their own*. Lippert-Rasmussen argues that the most important objections to luck egalitarianism made by social egalitarians can either be largely accommodated by luck egalitarians or lack the argumentative force that its proponents believe them to have. While Lippert-Rasmussen does offer a version of luck egalitarianism that seems to avoid some of the main lines of criticism, he mischaracterizes parts of both the form and the content of the disagreement, and thus ultimately misses the mark. In this paper, we provide a substantive, a methodological and a political defense of social egalitarianism by elaborating on this mischaracterization. More work must be done, we argue, if social egalitarianism is to be dismissed and its concerns genuinely incorporated in the luck egalitarian framework. Until this is done, the supposed theoretical superiority of luck egalitarianism remains contested.

# INTRODUCTION

In his new book, *Luck Egalitarianism*, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (2015a) offers a stimulating and innovative account of egalitarian justice - of what an ideally just egalitarian society would look like. On his view and for luck egalitarians in general, the basic premise of egalitarian justice is that *it is unfair if people are worse-off than others through no fault or choice of their own*. The motivating intuition is that the sheer bad luck of being born in a poor country, with a disability, or another unchosen disadvantage should not determine the course of someone's life. Justice, then, requires that individuals who are disadvantaged in such ways be compensated for the consequences of their unfortunate circumstances. Lippert-Rasmussen offers a new luck egalitarian account that fits within the broader description of luck egalitarianism. On his view, *people should be equal in terms of what they care about non-instrumentally and not unreasonably*. Such concerns may include people's own welfare, but also their ideals and the welfare of others. Any deviation from this type of equality that results from factors other than individual choice and exercises of responsibility - that is, from *bad luck* - is unjust. Egalitarian justice, in other words, is a matter of ensuring responsibility-sensitive fairness, properly understood.

One of the central aims of Lippert-Rasmussen's book is to respond to the challenges that were raised by "social-relations egalitarians" against luck egalitarianism. That response is the main focus of this article. Simply put, social-relations egalitarianism - or, social egalitarianism as we shall call it henceforth - is the view according to which a just society is one in which people relate to each other as equals and are free from, for example, relationships of domination or oppression.<sup>1</sup> In his recent book, Lippert-Rasmussen elaborates on and brings together ideas from recent articles in which he critically discusses the social egalitarian position (2012, 2015b). He defends two main claims to bolster the luck egalitarian case. First, that the most important objections to

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<sup>1</sup> The past three decades have seen the development of a number of social egalitarian arguments. See for instance: Anderson (1999, 2010b); O'Neill (2008); Scheffler (2003); Schemmel (2011); and Wolff (1998, 2015). See also, Fourie et al. (2015). In this paper, we use 'social egalitarianism' - relational egalitarianism and democratic egalitarianism are also used (Lippert-Rasmussen uses "social-relations egalitarianism").

luck egalitarianism in the social egalitarian arsenal do not stand careful scrutiny - leaving luck egalitarianism unscathed. Secondly, that the positive concerns of social egalitarians - the establishment of a community of relational equals - can largely be accommodated by the luck-egalitarian view. Social egalitarianism is, thus, neither superior nor fundamentally incompatible with luck egalitarianism.

In this article, we highlight central elements in the intra-egalitarian disagreement that Lippert-Rasmussen fails to recognize to a sufficient degree. Our discussion repels some of his new attacks and simultaneously hits back at luck egalitarianism by clarifying how its foundations and aims remain substantively (section I), methodologically (section II), and politically (section III) unsatisfactory. In doing so, we emphasize what we take to be the most fundamental points of contention between the two accounts, and clarify some ways in which social egalitarians can respond to Lippert-Rasmussen's attacks. Our reply does not espouse a specific account of social egalitarianism, but builds a defense from the constitutive elements shared by most theorists within this family. This defense, we argue, cast serious doubts on the superiority of Lippert-Rasmussen's luck egalitarian conception of egalitarian justice and its ability to accommodate the concerns raised by social egalitarians.

## SUBSTANTIVE CRITIQUE

Lippert-Rasmussen claims that social egalitarians reject the basic premise of luck egalitarianism entirely - that is, the view that "[egalitarian] justice is a matter of eliminating differential luck" (2015a: 218). It is more precise, however, to say that most social egalitarians believe that egalitarian justice is not *exclusively* and *primarily* a matter of distributing societal benefits on the basis of differential luck. Their view of an ideally just society encompasses a wide range of egalitarian commitments of which mitigating differential luck may be one. Indeed, they believe that luck egalitarianism underappreciates a rich depth of concerns that should be at the center of any plausible conception of equality: concerns with, for instance, status, power, sufficiency, freedom from domination, oppression, exclusion, marginalization, etc. So, while Lippert-Rasmussen claims that social egalitarians do not take differential luck

seriously, they might reply that luck egalitarians neglect a host of other important egalitarian values.

As Lippert-Rasmussen does well to show, however, it is not true that luck egalitarians are *oblivious* to these other values. More specifically, we identify two strategies that luck egalitarians in general, and Lippert-Rasmussen in particular, tend to adopt in order to acknowledge those values - one which *externalizes* the relational concerns and another which *internalizes* them.

**The externalizing strategy:** egalitarian justice can be defined as and reduced to (responsibility-sensitive) distributive fairness; but other things than egalitarian justice matter when determining what we ought to do all things considered, such as social relations, efficiency, sufficiency, and community.

**The internalizing strategy:** egalitarian justice can be defined as and reduced to distributive fairness, and other values, such as social relations, sufficiency and community can be *re-described* to fit within this framework.

The first strategy externalizes the concerns pointed out by social egalitarians, claiming that these are not matters of egalitarian justice, but may matter for other reasons when evaluating what to do *all things considered* in specific circumstances. The second strategy internalizes these concerns by claiming that they are, indeed, matters of egalitarian justice, and that distributive theories, suitably construed, are capable of acknowledging them. The most important elements of social egalitarianism, on this last view, can be re-described from within the luck egalitarianism framework. In this section, we illustrate and critically discuss these two strategies in turn.

## THE NARROWNESS OF LUCK EGALITARIAN EQUALITY

An example of the externalizing strategy can be found in Lippert-Rasmussen (2015a, 152-156), when he argues that egalitarian justice applies over people's entire lives, and that we should compare the opportunities people have access to *over their life as a whole*, rather than at a given point in time. In reaching this conclusion, he discusses

Dennis McKerlie's example of an 'Unequal City' in which the elderly live marginalized and segregated in a miserable retirement home, while the young thrive in a lovely residence nearby. The inhabitants of the Unequal City, however, all pass through those stages so that they are equal over their complete lives. After an interesting discussion of this example, Lippert-Rasmussen concludes: "McKerlie has identified some important intuitions that need to be explained", but "these need not derive from egalitarian justice" (2015a, 190). This is a clear example of what we have identified as the externalizing strategy. Lippert-Rasmussen argues that the inequality between old and young in McKerlie's example may be objectionable for reasons *external* to the value of egalitarian justice – for instance community.

He claims:

"what we are really responding to when we find his scenario objectionable is the sort of social relations or the lack of communal relations that exist between middle-aged and old people in his example rather than to some kind of inequalitarian injustice, distribution-wise. Indeed, there is a suspicion that the injustice that McKerlie focuses on, to the extent that it obtains, is of the sort that social relations egalitarians are concerned with." (Lippert-Rasmussen 2015a: 189)

On this account, the types of injustices on which McKerlie focuses would matter for reasons of *community* or *solidarity*, which, Lippert-Rasmussen claims, are not concerns of egalitarian justice. This, clearly, is an instance of the externalizing strategy.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, we will not provide an argument *per se* against the externalizing strategy. Instead, we want to suggest that identifying the externalizing strategy allows for a better understanding of an important source of disagreement between luck egalitarianism and social egalitarianism - a disagreement, that is, about the role and content of the concept of equality.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on what McKerlie's unequal city example and issues of age group justice tell us about our egalitarian commitments, see Bidadanure (2016).

For social egalitarians, a conception of equality that does not register the elderly being set aside and marginalized as wrong is fundamentally flawed. We should not have to seek non-egalitarian reasons to object to the Unequal City. Rather, these inequalities are exactly the type of cases that a conception of equality should be able to identify and condemn, because they are prime examples of the kind of unjust states of affairs egalitarians should want to avoid. Egalitarian justice is not reducible to distributive fairness, social egalitarians believe, and making it so impoverishes our conception unnecessarily. Responsibility-sensitive fairness might be *part* of the equation, but it does not encapsulate all our reasons to oppose inequalities, and our conception of egalitarian justice should reflect that. For Scanlon (2004, 18) for instance, we have sufficiency, status, power, and fairness (both luckist and non-luckist) based reasons to care about inequalities.<sup>3</sup>

Due to this conceptual disagreement, Lippert-Rasmussen's externalizing strategy is not likely to satisfy social egalitarian critics.<sup>4</sup> In order to avoid talking past them, Lippert-Rasmussen must provide reasons as to why one should prefer a *narrow* conception of egalitarian justice to an *inclusive* and *ramified* one à la Scanlon. By *ramified*, we mean a conception of equality that relies on an *explicit* and *fundamental* appeal to a system of other important values to describe the requirements of egalitarian justice. The disagreement is not, then, about whether community, sufficiency, domination, etc. are values that should figure in our considerations of what we ought to do. The disagreement, rather, is about whether those values should be called upon to describe the requirements of egalitarian justice. When using the externalizing strategy, Lippert-Rasmussen conceptually insulates the luck egalitarian premise from social egalitarian concerns. But to convince social egalitarians, he will have to provide more fundamental reasons for why we should treat relational

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<sup>3</sup> See also, O'Neill (2008), who argues that a conception of equality should be based on a prior account of what is bad about inequalities.

<sup>4</sup> It might be worth noticing that some social egalitarians would seemingly approve of the externalizing strategy (e.g. David Miller 1976). The main targets of Lippert-Rasmussen's critique, however, would not.

concerns as *residual* when they could be integrated as part of a broader conception of egalitarian justice.<sup>5</sup>

There are at least two problematic implications of the externalizing strategy: the first concerns the applicability of luck egalitarianism and the second is political. The first problematic implication is discussed in Tim Meijers and Pierre-Etienne Vandamme (2017)'s paper, which is also featured in this issue. Because Lippert-Rasmussen's account relies on a narrow conception of egalitarian justice, they claim, it is unable to provide a view on how its core principle relates to other values, leaving us without a principled way to adjudicate in situations in which these values are at odds. This casts the view's relevance severely into doubt. These conceptual issues are more closely linked to the social egalitarian challenge to luck egalitarianism than Lippert-Rasmussen assumes. The first kind of potentially troublesome implication of the appeal to the externalizing strategy by Lippert-Rasmussen is thus that it prevents his luck egalitarianism to be action-guiding in the way social egalitarians think egalitarian justice should be. We will return to the second potentially negative implication of the externalizing strategy in Section 3. It has to do with the political risks that come with the use of a conception of justice exclusively centered on individual responsibility.

## **THE MISCHARACTERIZATION OF SOCIAL EGALITARIAN CONCERNS**

Social egalitarians, as Lippert-Rasmussen rightly notes, put much focus on *relations*, which they claim must take an egalitarian form. People must, according to this view, relate to one another in an egalitarian way. To social egalitarians, an egalitarian conception that fails to capture relational concerns, as we have just discussed, is inadequate. The second way in which Lippert-Rasmussen seeks to avert the social egalitarian critique is by showing that their concerns can be re-described in distributive terms. In this way, he aims to show that social egalitarianism can basically be framed as *one particular variant* of distributive justice rather than a fundamentally distinct conception of equality. In fact, he argues, a version of luck egalitarianism

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<sup>5</sup> Note that this disagreement is different from the terminological one which Lippert-Rasmussen discusses and dismisses in chapter 8.



*could be construed* which accommodates social egalitarian concerns completely. To illustrate this, he considers the example of the distribution of “the good of having social standing that is equal to that of another.” He then attempts to show the way in which luck-egalitarians “could sensibly object to unequal distributions of recognition that do not reflect differential exercise of responsibility” (2015a: 238). The point of this exercise is to show that what matters to social egalitarians can be subsumed under the distributive category, making the disagreement less fundamental (and potentially non-existent). This is an example of what we call the internalizing strategy.

Lippert-Rasmussen’s point is that equal relations, social respect, freedom from domination, recognition, and freedom from public shame can be recast as *equalisanda*, all of which can, in principle, fit into a luck-egalitarian framework.<sup>6</sup> To see how this is meant to work, consider Lippert-Rasmussen’s example of Mary and John - two distributees of “the good of having social standing.” Lippert-Rasmussen asks us to imagine that “Mary and John have equal amounts of this good if, and only if, they relate to one another as equals. Mary has more of this good than John has if, and only if, [Mary] relates to [John] as a superior individual to an inferior individual and *vice versa*.” (2015a: 238). Setting aside whether this is the proper way of conceiving of equality more broadly (whether it is sufficiently rich to capture what we really care about, as mentioned in the previous section), another problem arises here.

The problem is that conceiving *interpersonal* relations in terms of distributive shares fails to capture fundamentally *non-distributive* dimensions of the relational phenomena with which social egalitarians are preoccupied. As a result, Lippert-Rasmussen mischaracterizes the pluralism on which the social egalitarian theory is built, which to an important degree resists individualization, incorporates a concern not only with outcomes but also with attitudes, and, generally, defies the marketization of social goods involved in the internalizing strategy. To return to the example, then, saying that “John has a high amount of the good of social standing when he relates to Mary, who has a low amount of the good, as a superior individual

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<sup>6</sup> For another attempt of this kind, see Gheaus (2016). See also Cordelli (2015) for a related discussion about the distribution of relational goods.

to an inferior individual” does not capture all of what is *at stake* in the relation between John and Mary.<sup>7</sup>

The redescription represents social standing as if it were something that is purely measurable in individual holdings (something that can be *had*) when, in fact, it is *internal to a relation* and cannot be captured adequately by looking *only* at John or Mary individually. Unequal social standing is a particular manner of human interaction and important parts of this are lost when focusing only on how this interaction impacts John or Mary’s individual holdings or wellbeing. By individualizing relations in such manner, the internalizing strategy overlooks the fundamentally *social and interpersonal* nature of their constituent components: status, respectful treatment, non-domination, esteem, etc. A society, in which people relate to each other as equals, has *intrinsic* value as well – and undermining this can be *wrong*, even if it harms no one. By focusing *only* on how individuals are affected, the luck egalitarian redescription fails to capture one important feature of equal and respectful relations – namely, its intrinsic value.<sup>8</sup>

The internalizing strategy re-describes social egalitarianism as *outcome-oriented* by focusing only on how relations affect distributions. The relation between John and Mary, for example, is evaluated via the distribution of “the good of social standing.” But relating to one another as equals is not (just) a matter of outcomes or holdings. It is also, for example, about considerate treatment and respectful attitudes towards fellow citizens (and human beings, more generally).<sup>9</sup> As Christian Schemmel puts it: “we do not only have to distribute properly, we also have to treat people properly while doing so: the latter consideration functions as a constraint on the former” (2012, 141). How unequal relations affect the wellbeing and holdings of the relevant individuals is certainly *one* aspect of what should concern us, but it is not all that matters. There is something bad, inegalitarian, and unjust about a society in which oppressive attitudes, and outlooks prevail – such relations are bad regardless of how it

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<sup>7</sup> See Young (1990), chap. 1, for another critical discussion of this internalizing tendency.

<sup>8</sup> See also, Fourie (2012) for a related distinction between the intrinsic and instrumental harms of social inequalities. See also Miller (1998), 24.

<sup>9</sup> See also, Slavny and Parr (2015) for an argument to this effect on the topic of discrimination.

impacts people's shares and opportunities (although, social egalitarians agree, it is worse if they do).<sup>10</sup> Lippert-Rasmussen's redescription cannot capture this element either because the wrongness of relations consists in more than their effect on individual holdings.

One key problem with luck egalitarianism, thus, is that it cannot capture all concerns of unequal relations, domination, oppression, or differences in social status, in a satisfactory manner – at least, not by way of the two strategies employed by Lippert-Rasmussen. When luck egalitarians attempt to externalize the concerns – by admitting that they are important but not as concerns of egalitarian justice – their concept of equality risks becoming unduly narrow rendering it inoperative (and, as we will discuss in Section 3, politically problematic). If luck egalitarians seek to internalize relational concerns, on the other hand, they risk mischaracterizing and distorting the wrongness at stake in these relationships. Substantively and conceptually, Lippert-Rasmussen's version of luck egalitarianism will thus not satisfy social egalitarians since its value foundation is too narrow.

## METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

Moving on from our normative critique, we believe that Lippert-Rasmussen overlooks a number of ways in which social egalitarianism differs *methodologically* from luck egalitarianism. And when Lippert-Rasmussen claims that luck egalitarianism, properly understood, is immune to social egalitarian objections, he is trading on this misconception. Part of what he portrays as substantive differences between the two accounts is, *in fact*, better conceived of as a methodological difference. Because of this misunderstanding, his luck egalitarian defence shields itself from the wrong type of attack and does not escape the methodological critique that is both implicitly and explicitly contained in (some versions of) social egalitarianism.

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<sup>10</sup> See also Anderson (2010)'s "third disagreement with luck egalitarianism" for a similar idea that justice is a virtue, rather than a state of affairs.

In particular, this is clear when Lippert-Rasmussen (2015a, 233) complains that Elizabeth Anderson uses an imprecise language: rather than saying, “this is false,” for instance, she says “it feeds the suspicion,” or “bolsters the objection.” This, we think, is symptomatic of a deeper disagreement about the role and methods of political philosophy. To ground this, we will first show how the accusation of imprecision is better understood as a difference in the way in which ideals are constructed. Building on this, we will then claim that it is, in fact, a misunderstanding to say that social egalitarians are vague; their precision merely occurs at *a different level of abstraction*. When it comes to theorizing inequalities while remaining sensitive to the *actual* ways in which they emerge, cluster, pervade and prevail, the charge of imprecision can in fact be turned *against* luck egalitarians.

### **ABSTRACT ANALYTICAL INDETERMINACY**

Lippert-Rasmussen lists the negative aims of social egalitarianism in a number of different ways: they aim to “end oppression,” eliminate “relations between superior and inferior persons” (Anderson 1999, 312) and are opposed “to oppression, heritable hierarchies of social status, to ideas of caste, to class privilege and the rigid stratification of classes, and to the undemocratic distribution of power” (Scheffler 2003, 22). Their positive formulation, on the other hand, usually amounts to variations of the relatively vague notion that citizens “must be able to relate to each other as equals”. Lippert-Rasmussen laments this fact, arguing: “accounts of their ideal are more sketchy and incomplete than one might have wished for” (2015a, 181) and generally noting that it is difficult to work out what exactly we are to aim for if we wish to realize the social egalitarian ideal. His claim, then, is that the social egalitarian ideal is vague and indeterminate, whereas the basic premise of luck egalitarian justice – that we must ensure responsibility-sensitive fairness – is comparatively precise.

Granting (for now) that Lippert-Rasmussen is right about the relative indeterminacy of the social egalitarian ideal, it is not clear that most social egalitarians would find such accusations detrimental to their endeavor. This is because many social egalitarians are practicing a different brand of political philosophy than luck egalitarians; or, rather, proposing different kinds of ideals. They do not see the purpose of political philosophy as being about developing moral and political

principles whose implications are intuitively correct in all possible worlds. Rather, the point is to offer moral tools and clear normative arguments to make better sense of what is unjust in current states of affairs - this is most clearly the case for Elizabeth Anderson and Jonathan Wolff.<sup>11</sup> To them, many things about the contemporary world are fundamentally unjust and achieving hypothetical-world precision in our ideals is not necessary to provide normative arguments about how and why this is the case. This is not to say that social egalitarians do not also disagree substantively about the kind of conception of equality we should hold as an ideal (see first section); but it is often *because* they disagree about the roles such ideals are meant to play that their conception of equality differs. As Anderson (2010a, 3) notes, “knowledge of the better does not require knowledge of the best.” For this reason, indeterminacy regarding the question of what egalitarian justice requires in all possible scenarios (including purely hypothetical ones) is not necessarily lamentable.

In more recent writings, Anderson (2015) has provided a set of arguments against the abstract analytical precision of ideal theorizing. Abstracting too far away from our current practices and values, she argues, is *epistemologically* problematic. We are all heavily influenced by social and cultural biases, which cloud our ability to clearly see what highly idealized societies and institutions might look like. Because of the pervasiveness of these biases and because of the epistemological difficulties involved in knowing how social ideals will actually function, Anderson maintains “that we should replace the quest for ultimate or highly general principles with methods for intelligently updating our current moral beliefs” (Anderson 2015, 22). In particular, Anderson mentions that we should seek to correct social biases, which tend to distort our thinking and discourses, and attempt experiments in living, which will provide practical knowledge about how certain injustices may be overcome (Anderson 2015 - see also, Anderson 2014). Both of these approaches, rather than seeking to abstract from biases and the circumstances of current injustices, seek to overcome them from within. This epistemological rejection of ideal theory may go *much* further than most social egalitarians are willing to go, but it is an additional potential explanation for the social egalitarian worry about abstract analytical precision.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Anderson (2010a), Wolff and de-Shalit (2007), and Wolff (2015).

Luck egalitarians (and ideal theorists more broadly) will still object to the indeterminacy of the alternative methodological approach of social egalitarians. For now, however, we simply note that Lippert-Rasmussen's vagueness critique will not disturb many social egalitarians, because indeterminacy or open-endedness of this kind is not necessarily detrimental to the social egalitarian project, which is intimately tied to understanding and assessing *existing* social injustices. The standards, in other words, by which Lippert-Rasmussen judges his egalitarian adversaries are not the ones by which they all judge themselves. Whether or not this is a superior, inferior, or simply a complementary method for political theory is a discussion for another time, but it is, crucially, partly a methodological discussion and must be treated as such.

### DIAGNOSTIC PRECISION

While social egalitarians often do not seek the abstract precision towards which luck egalitarians strive, this does not mean that they are *imprecise*. In this section, we challenge the double claim that social egalitarianism *is*, in fact, imprecise and that luck egalitarianism *is more* precise. Our claim here is that the precision of social egalitarians is pitched at *a lower level of abstraction*. At this level of abstraction, theorists are thoroughly informed by the workings of actual injustices. They seek to achieve what we call *diagnostic precision*. . Their aim is to correctly and precisely determine what is wrong in situations of injustice *as they actually occur*. To determine what the world ought to be, on this view, we need to understand the many ways in which the world is wrong right now. For this reason, diagnostic precision requires taking actually occurring political and moral issues as the point of departure, rather than possible or hypothetical ones.

Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit (2007), for instance, discuss in important details how disadvantage tends to *cluster* in society, this way exacerbating existing inequalities. If we were all disadvantaged in *one* respect, they argue, egalitarians would not have much to worry about. What is normatively problematic from the point of view of equality is that disadvantage clusters in such ways that those who are disadvantaged in certain fundamental respects, such as the lack of access to income or shelter, incur high risks of becoming disadvantaged in other respects. The authors identify a range of disadvantages, some of which they claim are "corrosive" in this

manner – they yield further disadvantages. In doing so, they define a core aim of egalitarian justice, informed by a precise diagnosis of how disadvantage *works*: the eradication of corrosive disadvantages (whose corollary is the investment in fertile functionings, the promotion of which yields further advantages). The goal here is not to flesh out an abstract ideal for the distribution of the individual advantages and disadvantages (as a luck egalitarian might do). Rather, the aim is to precisely describe the reasons why some forms of disadvantage are more normatively concerning than others from an egalitarian perspective. In other words, their diagnostic precision stems from constructing their account around, and *not* abstracting from, the most salient features of how inequalities and disadvantages *actually* appear and function. This aim is fundamentally different from the abstract precision to which Lippert-Rasmussen and most other luck egalitarians aspire.

Similarly, Anderson's reluctance to accept luck egalitarianism, we claim, is to a large extent motivated by her sociological, historical, and political sensibility and the accompanying wish to diagnose such injustices precisely. This sensibility leads her and other social egalitarians to adopt a conception of equality that does justice to both the actual ways in which oppression and exclusion operate and to the egalitarian struggles that have mobilized and continue to animate the social movements of the oppressed, including women, civil rights, anti-colonialist, LGBT, and workers movements. In this sense, Anderson's complaint that luck egalitarians exclude the important aim that LGBTs be able to appear in public without shame or fear is not *merely* a worry that there is no way for luck egalitarians to properly account for those inequalities in the language of luck and circumstances. Social egalitarians (often, though not always) might say that the fundamental precision of luck egalitarians comes at a cost. It becomes too abstract and detached from the real injustices that most need to be overcome. Thus, if the goal of our theorizing is to develop tools to understand current moral issues, as social egalitarians believe, we must necessarily engage with, rather than abstract from, such experiences to say something that is relevant.

But, the luck egalitarian may respond, how are we supposed to know which inequalities are most relevant without careful abstract theorizing? How can we know

which concepts, conceptions, mechanisms, and principles are most pertinent without knowing what we are aiming for (precisely)? To illustrate further how luck egalitarianism fails to diagnose actual injustices appropriately, one might take a closer look at the notion of individual responsibility – a theoretical cornerstone in the luck egalitarian infrastructure. As mentioned, the basic luck egalitarian principle states that it is unfair if people are worse-off than others through no fault or choice of their own. The formula thus requires attaching central importance to the dichotomy of individual responsibility and luck. But via this simplification, the luck egalitarian approach often obscures the mechanisms and processes that explain the wrongness of inequalities in real lives, which are almost never a product of responsible choice. When people face great obstacles to succeeding in life, social egalitarians hold, it is hardly ever because of irresponsible choices but (mainly) as a result of oppressive or exclusionary social structures, norms and practices. By focusing on responsibility, they obscure rather than illuminate the real causes of injustices, which become blurred under the individual-focused category of bad luck. In under-emphasizing institutions and norms as factors determining the consequences of choice and the social attribution of responsibility, they keep out of sight precisely the real-life inegalitarian practices, which cause and maintain the injustices that surround us.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, it seems that, at this level of abstraction, the charge of imprecision can be turned against luck egalitarians. If we contend, as Wolff and De-Shalit do, that the normative significance of equality is tied to the sociology of actual disadvantages, then we will find that luck egalitarian principles are comparatively detached from the mechanisms and rhetoric of inegalitarian structures. Their diagnosis of what is unjust about the world lacks sociological context and, in this sense, their normative theorizing is *imprecise* in at least one way. This is not to say that such discussions cannot teach us something about justice. It simply means that their pursuit of abstract ideal precision will sometimes come at the cost of diagnosing what is wrong about *this* world; and this is a cost that social egalitarians are not willing to pay.

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<sup>12</sup> For a related worry, see also Marion Smiley's (1992) eminent work on the inadequacy of equating individual responsibility with blameworthiness separately from the social structures and norms within which this blaming occurs.



In this second part of our paper, we have thus suggested that Lippert-Rasmussen's critiques latches onto a methodological difference between the two kinds of egalitarian theories. First, quite a few social egalitarians resist employing the abstract ideal precision to which Lippert-Rasmussen adheres, and he must engage with their underlying reasoning to disprove the validity of their claims. Second, social egalitarians are, in fact, precise, although in a different manner; they are *diagnostically precise* – they rigorously analyze what is wrong with the mechanisms of actual injustices. We also suggested that, when evaluated from this level of abstraction, luck egalitarianism becomes the imprecise theory.

## POLITICAL CRITIQUE

Anderson asks if luck-egalitarianism would have looked any different if it had secretly been penned by conservative writers (1999, 287). Lippert-Rasmussen, however, dismisses this as overly polemic. But separating the argumentative content from its polemical form, can something be said for the idea? We believe the claim contains an important *political* critique of luck egalitarianism – and particularly, of its tendency to reduce egalitarian justice to responsibility-sensitive fairness.

One general, if often implicit, point in much social-egalitarian writing is that theories of egalitarian justice should not lend themselves to political projects, which work in the opposite direction of their ideal - and that luck egalitarianism does just that.<sup>13</sup> In other words, an egalitarian theory should not help uphold or reproduce a system of inequality. Lippert-Rasmussen considers this idea briefly, but denies that principles in themselves can play such a role, since they should not be thought of as policy advice: “a true principle as such neither stigmatizes anyone, nor gives anyone an incentive to do one thing rather than another” (2015a: 233). Furthermore, he argues that it would be a mistake for philosophers to aim at producing the right political outcomes rather than seeking the truth, since political reality requires taking many different factors into account (such as efficiency, political feasibility, etc.) which are unrelated to truth:

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<sup>13</sup> See Anderson 2015, 26, Wolff 2015, 11. See also Jubb & Kurtulmus 2012

“It would be an error to require *a priori* that the concerns of the egalitarian political philosopher do not diverge from those of the activist” (2015a: 233).

Most social egalitarians, we take it, would not disagree with these statements, but some would be led to a different conclusion (particularly, Anderson and Wolff). Even if the egalitarian political philosopher should not be indistinguishable from the activist, she should not be unmoved by activist concerns either. Thus, some social egalitarians would emphasize that political theory is importantly *political* and holds the potential for actual societal transformation. We have already seen that social egalitarians build their theories around a broad conception of equality to better guide political action and that they work from precise diagnoses of actually occurring injustices rather than abstract (hypothetical) ones. And these theoretical aspirations, we claim, flow from a particular view of the *role* of political philosophers.

Now, the purpose of this paper is not to flesh out how political philosophers should incorporate their status as political agents in their theorizing. Rather, we will say, more modestly, that there seems to be an underlying, implicit disagreement between the two egalitarian camps that Lippert-Rasmussen overlooks. Thus, for many social egalitarians, the disagreement is also about the role of political philosophy in politics and not *only* a disagreement about what the “true egalitarian principles” are taken to be. While they agree that this role should be different from that of the activist, they do not think, which Lippert-Rasmussen seems to do, that principles should be considered and developed in complete isolation from their potential (and even most probable) influence on politics.

Importantly, then, political philosophers *can* and potentially *do* influence political debates and people’s reasoning and behaviour through their theorizing. And it is in this light, we think, that Anderson’s worry about luck egalitarianism looking as though it was penned by conservative writers - and Wolff’s worry that policy makers reading Ronald Dworkin would take this as underpinning Thatcherism, rather than egalitarianism (Wolff 1998, 112) - should be read. The problem, understood in this way, lies with the luck egalitarian fixation with the question of whether or not individuals are themselves responsible for their plight. This focus, they worry, is

highly susceptible to being appropriated by political agents working against the luck egalitarian cause and to being distorted by the dominant political discourses that serve to reproduce and legitimize current injustices through accusations of (ir)responsibility.

To see how this may constitute a problem, note the following example of the stigmatization of the unemployed. People who do not have a job are often met with threats of having their benefits taken away or drastically reduced. The unemployed, in this way, are being held responsible for their ‘choice not to work’ and labelled ‘benefits scroungers’; ‘welfare queens’; and ‘a lazy self-entitled generation’ in political discourses. The dominant feature of the current debate on unemployment assistance concerns whether benefits seekers can be held responsible for their unemployment and ensuing poverty. Because of this, as Wolff puts it, there is now a need to de-emphasize individual responsibility and focus instead on fairness, compassion, and solidarity (Wolff 2015, 11).<sup>14</sup>

Now, clearly Lippert-Rasmussen and other luck-egalitarians do not condone the stigmatization of the unemployed. There is however a *political* or *strategic* worry. By embracing, rather than circumventing or correcting for the political overemphasis on individual responsibility, luck egalitarians run the risk of (inadvertently) reinforcing anti-egalitarian political discourses that feed on a distorted view of individual responsibility (Wolff 2015).<sup>15</sup> By dismissing individual responsibility from the center stage, social egalitarians, instead, seek to change the terms of the debate and offer a stronger *political* critique of the mechanisms used to exclude the disadvantaged. In other words, they seek to provide arguments that are more politically employable in subverting injustices and less liable to appropriation. It is in this way that the different role, which some social egalitarians envision for political philosophers, influences their theorizing.

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<sup>14</sup> Note that this is not a problem with the value of responsibility *per se* but, rather, with a focus that lends itself easily to responsibility-assessment or *holding* people responsible (see, for example, McTernan 2015 for a responsibility-sensitive account which is not subject to this critique).

<sup>15</sup> See also Kymlicka 2002, 93-96;

In response, it should be noted that several distributive egalitarians, including Ronald Dworkin and G.A. Cohen (and Lippert-Rasmussen) seem to think that re-conceptualizing the key value of the right ‘individual responsibility’ is an important element of subverting the conservative ideology from the inside (Cohen famously notes that Dworkin has “performed for egalitarianism the considerable service of incorporating within it the most powerful idea in the arsenal of the antiegalitarian right: the idea of choice and responsibility,” (1989), 933). The social egalitarians mentioned above take issue with this strategy, claiming that it is politically unsound (and, as we saw above, diagnostically imprecise) and that its conservative core means that it lends itself too easily to inegalitarian misappropriation. Importantly, however, given their commitment to the strict separation of moral truth and political practice, luck egalitarians do not think that the choice of theory should depend on such matters. What we have identified here, then, is an implicit question about which forms of political jargon in fact do work to bring about a better state of affairs – and, further, a disagreement about how the answer to this question should affect normative theorizing.

Some social egalitarians believe that responsibility-assessment is a process best avoided. Normative theorists, on this view, should avoid constructing theories which rely heavily on such processes because the political use thereof is heavily skewed against the worst-off. So, even if political philosophers should not emulate political activism they should not (and cannot) be *apolitical* either. Given that luck egalitarians advocate, and supposedly genuinely support a normative ideal of equality, they should concern themselves with the possibility that their theories contribute to discursively uphold inequalities that are due to bad luck rather than responsibility. Besides a substantial and a methodological disagreement, then, luck egalitarians and social egalitarians seem to disagree about the relation between normative theorizing and political practice. This disagreement is important, not only because it raises important issues about what political philosophers should be doing, but also because overlooking this dimension leads to misunderstandings of what is at stake and what needs to be resolved.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Lippert-Rasmussen's critique of social egalitarianism misses the mark in three ways: (1) when seeking to externalize other values from the concept of egalitarian justice, his luck egalitarian account becomes unduly narrow in a way that would not satisfy most social egalitarians; (2) by not taking seriously the underlying methodological disagreement on the role of ideals in political theory, Lippert-Rasmussen exaggerates the issue of indeterminacy in social egalitarian ideals; and (3) he underestimates the social egalitarian political concern with correcting the moral bias in discourses on individual responsibility. Furthermore, Lippert-Rasmussen's own preferred conception of equality has important deficiencies from which social egalitarianism does not suffer: (1) substantively, it fails to capture important intrinsic and non-consequentialist aspects of interpersonal relations and (2) methodologically, it lacks diagnostic precision. More work must be done, then, if social egalitarianism is to be rebutted or their concerns incorporated in the luck egalitarian framework. Until these problems are overcome, the supposed theoretical superiority of luck egalitarianism remains contested.

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