**Critical Exchange**

**Response to Giacomo Floris**

# On Egalitarian Pluralism and the Fragility of Self-Respect

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## *Introduction*

I would like to thank Giacomo Floris for his thoughtful and interesting comment on *Justice and Egalitarian Relations* (henceforth JER), and the editors of *Biblioteca della Libertà* for the opportunity to respond to them. Floris' comment raises two important issues. The first is whether JER contains, in addition to an argument for the significance of relational inequality for social justice, an argument *against* distributive inequality alone being of such significance. The second concerns the impact of inegalitarian relations on individuals' self-respect. It asks whether there is any non-arbitrary criterion for distinguishing those inegalitarian relations that are unjust (also) because of the threat that they pose to self-respect from those that are not unjust on these grounds.

This response addresses these issues in turn. Section 1 clarifies that chapter 2 of JER, on which Floris' comment focuses, indeed contains no argument against the significance to justice of 'pure' distributive inequality. However, other parts of JER deliver reasons for why relational equality matters *more* than distributive equality, and point to further reasons why 'pure' distributive inequality might not matter at all. In fact, this is what Floris' main intended counterexample, rightly interpreted, also suggests. Section 2 recaps, and adds to, the argument of JER for why not all unjust unequal relations are unjust on grounds of threatening self-respect. It accepts Floris' claim that there is no general, hard and fast criterion distinguishing relations, taken individually or as bundles, that objectionably threaten self-respect from those that do not. However, it argues that this

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is not a reason to re-classify all unjust unequal relations as such threats. Instead, we should partly readjust our focus, from analysing the threats that any social relation might (or might not) pose, to requiring the positive epistemic and motivational resources that individuals need to develop robust self-respect enabling them to resist threats.

## 1. E*galitarian pluralism*

Chapter 2 of JER argues for an expressive perspective on social justice: according to it, the justice or injustice of how individuals are treated – by institutions, or individuals – is not reducible to the distributive outcomes such treatment brings about, but also depends on the attitude expressed in it.[1] Floris recaps the different scenarios used in JER to illustrate this view (in this volume, 75). Here, we only need a comparison between two: an institutional order allowing holders of scarce, necessary resources, such as, for example, vital nutrients, to discriminate freely against other individuals by barring their access to the resource expresses a more unjust attitude towards the latter than an order that merely avoidably fails to guarantee the resource to all, for example because it manages overall production somewhat inefficiently. In the former case, we might say that the order expresses a form of *contempt* towards the victims, while in the latter it expresses only a form of *neglect*. However, nothing, at this point, hinges on how we call the respective attitudes, and the example does not aim at delivering any kind of systematic injustice ordering, but merely at teasing out differences and their relevance. The remainder of the chapter aims to show that distributive egalitarian views cannot satisfactorily account for these.

Floris accepts this relevance, and that, in this case, it has to do with relational inequality (in this volume, 76). In the first scenario, the order

[1] Chapter 2 of JER focuses much more on the expression of institutional attitudes than on the expression of individual ones, but this is not because the expressive perspective is somehow supposed to be uniquely applicable to the former. It is because institutional attitudes are evidently the harder case, regarding both whether institutions have attitudes at all, and why these should have special moral significance.

in question sees no problem with victims being subject to the arbitrary power of resource holders (domination). However, he argues that the chapter does not show that distributive inequality alone – that some have this resource and others do not, or that the former have more of it - is of *no* relevance to justice. It does not yield reasons to reject the "'Core Distributive Thesis': the distribution of non-relational goods has relation-independent significance from the point of view of justice" (Miklosi 2018, 113; Floris, in this volume, 74). That is correct: the argument does not have this aim (as Miklosi recognises, *ibidem*, 117).[2] Its aim within JER is to show what distributive egalitarianism misses, in order to motivate the development of a relational egalitarian conception of justice; one that will supply normative substance for making less preliminary and merely intuitive – more informed, better ordered and justified – expressive assessments. JER privileges this constructive enterprise over any attempt to refute rival theories for the reason mentioned by Floris (in this volume, 73): in the current literature, there is no shortage of objections to distributive egalitarianism, but a shortage of worked-out conceptions of relational egalitarianism. Consequently, throughout JER, there is no attempt to refute distributive egalitarianism at all; for all it says, pluralism about justice of the kind Floris advocates remains a possibility.[3]

However, the main aim of JER is to show that relational equality is the most stringently and demandingly egalitarian dimension of a liberal conception of social justice. That does require showing more than that relational equality *also* matters for justice; it requires an argument that it matters more than other kinds of equality (if those matter at all). Chapter 2 of JER puts the expressive perspective on justice in place in order to show that, within it, such arguments are available: later chapters then work these out. An institutional order giving concrete others superior and arbitrary power over the fulfilment of your claims and interests expresses that you are not their equal, but their inferior

[2] He refers to the article on which chapter 2 of JER is based, not the chapter, but that argument remains unchanged.

[3] Schouten (2022) also notices this possibility, and explores its implications. Floris (in this volume, 74, n. 4) claims that chapter 2 of JER (30-31) "rejects" pluralism; but the passage referred to merely argues that it would be theoretically and practically better if we could do without it.

(chapters 3, 4). Other things being equal, it does so in a worse, more clear-cut way ('is more contemptuous') than if it merely allocates more of some relevant good to them than to you (especially if your share would, otherwise, be adequate in absolute terms). Similarly, a society failing to counteract inegalitarian social norms, which devalue some personal traits of yours (such as your working class accent and vocabulary), and coordinate the behaviour of norm-followers to deprive you of some important social opportunity (chapter 6) – such as acquiring an abode in a quarter that you like – instantiates an unjust social inequality (while lacking the same opportunity for other reasons might not be unjust). It does so even if none of the individuals participating in norm enactment, taken alone, has superior power over you.

Compared to that, 'simple' distributive inequality in relevant goods, such as resources, matters less than distributive inequality produced through relations of domination or status inequality, or leading to these; but any inequality in socially produced good and bads does require justification (chapters 8, 9). That does suggest that some distributive inequality in relevant goods – inequality lacking any social pedigree *or* relational consequences – does not matter at all for justice; such as, to use a worn-out, hypothetical example, perhaps inequality of wealth between two societies that up to now have been completely isolated from each other, and will hardly interact in the future.[4] That is, in fact, my view; however, strictly speaking, JER only contains an argument for the expressive perspective and an argument that, if one adopts it, relational egalitarian demands have a certain priority over distributive demands.[5] Pluralist arguments could thus dispute that the expressive perspective is (uniquely) the right one to adopt, or mount an internal challenge showing that 'simple' distributive inequality has greater expressive significance than JER contends – and always has such significance, irrespective of social context.

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[4] For some (inconclusive) remarks on relational equality in matters of international, supranational, and global justice, see the Conclusion of JER.

[5] Not lexical priority: a societal order producing massive inequality of income and wealth is more unjust, for that reason alone, than one permitting some slight domination over minor matters (of course, massive inequality of income and wealth will itself engender sizeable domination).

One putative reason for pluralism is a worry that relational egalitarianism alone fastens only onto a narrow set of social concerns. Floris shares this worry. In order to substantiate it he devises the following example:

> Distinguish three different scenarios in which, owing to state's official mandate, a group of innocent persons is avoidably deprived of vitamin D, the lack of which contributes to severe migraine headaches. In scenario 1, the only way of getting vitamin D is by purchasing foodstuffs containing vitamin D from local shops. Accordingly, the group of people who are prohibited from buying foodstuffs containing vitamin D suffer from severe and frequent migraine headaches. In scenario 2, although [...] legal restrictions bar [...] certain people from buying foodstuffs containing vitamin D, they can still take a limited amount of vitamin D, thanks to some limited natural resources they have access to. As a result, they suffer from less severe and less frequent migraine headaches than in scenario 1. Finally, in scenario 3, there are plenty of natural resources available. This allows individuals who are banned from buying foodstuffs containing vitamin D to get an almost adequate daily intake of vitamin D. Hence, they suffer from very rare and mild episodes of headache [...] (in this volume, 76-77).

The example is supposed to illustrate the need for a pluralism that accounts for how distributive inequality – here, in health – matters in its own right, because, intuitively, injustice decreases from scenario 1 to 3, even if, Floris maintains, "the relational wrong is equal across the three scenarios" (in this volume, 77).

Three points need to be made in response. First, in all three scenarios the social order in question causes the health deprivation through a ban on acquiring the relevant foodstuffs. A capacious, distribution-friendly view such as the one advocated in JER (chapters 8, 9) holds that other things being equal, an order that brings about greater distributive inequality is more unjust, and therefore agrees that injustice decreases from scenario 1 to 3. Second, even narrower relational egalitarian views fastening *only* on the quality of social relations between individuals (here, between officials, or shopkeepers, who have the relevant foodstuffs, and those denied their purchase) have no difficulty locating a relevant difference, which leads to the same ranking: other things being equal, the more you can make others suffer, the more power over them you have. In the absence of justification for that power and tight constraints on how

it can be used (or matching counter-power of your own), this amounts to domination; so, domination decreases from 1 to 3.

Third, a case can be made that it is in fact *only* relational egalitarian views that can account for there being injustice in scenario 3 *at all*. For example, on one view of health, what is unjust about health deprivation is that it deprives you of the ability to function normally. That might not to be the case in scenario 3. Justice might not require that all be equally free from mild headaches that do not impede functioning – even if those headaches could be avoided by directing some resources towards the sufferers (resources that will then not be spent on meeting other social goals).[6] Against that, the ability of some to make others suffer might well be a problem of justice even if the sufferers remain above some relevant health-threshold. Having the power to deprive others of non-essential goods, or rather, having more such power than others, can be unjust even if simply lacking the good, or some lacking it while others do not, is not. Thus, from a relational egalitarian perspective, it is not harder, but easier to see than from a purely distributive perspective what unjust inequality (if any) is present in scenario 3. JER does not rule out pluralism about social justice incorporating concern about pure distributive inequality; but Floris' comment does not show that it is needed.

## 2. *Self-respect*

The second part of Floris' comment engages with the argument of chapter 6 of JER. This chapter investigates why status norms of the kind mentioned in section 1 above are unjust, even if they do not involve domination, or deprive those subject to them of goods to which they already have an independent right. One reason could be that they undermine appropriate self-respect (and/or self-esteem)[7], which, in order to be appropriate, needs to incorporate the firm conviction that one is the moral equal of others, and therefore also entitled to equal social and political standing. In fact,

[6] To some extent, Floris seems to agree: he leaves open whether justice requires "equal" or only "adequate" access to the good in question (in this volume, 77).

[7] For different dimensions of self-respect in play, see Floris (in this volume, 79-80); here, it is not necessary to go into these differences.

sweeping appeals to self-respect are common in the relational egalitarian literature (see the references in chapters 5 and 6 of JER).

However, chapter 6 argues that for liberals at least, not all unjust unequal relations can be classified as unjust threats to self-respect. The reason for this, as Floris explains (in this volume, 79-80), is that self-respect performs a crucial orientation function for agents, enabling their autonomy. An important part of autonomy is to be able to react appropriately when not everything goes well for the agent: not to lose orientation about one's value and one's options when dealing with threats, including threats to one's conviction of one's worth. In that sense, persons' convictions of their own worth do not only need to be appropriate in content, but *robust*. The broader our appeal to self-respect when objecting to unequal relations, the more are we committed to viewing agents as dependent on (all) others' appreciation – as capable of orientation only when everything goes well for them, including being subject to no injustice at all.[8] That fails to give autonomy its due, and therefore leads away from a *liberal* conception of relational equality.

This, however, gives rise to the important challenge now raised by Floris (in this volume, 80): there seems to be no non-arbitrary way to sort those relations that we should classify as unjust threats to self-respect from those we should not (even if they are unjust for other reasons). He makes suggestive examples to bolster this challenge, such as the case of Katie, a company director who is ignored in board meetings by the chair, while the chair does pay attention to and praises the interventions of all other members (in this volume, 81). This may well give rise to self-doubt in Katie, but Floris surmises that, based on this description alone, the position taken in JER would not judge her to be subject to injustice on grounds of self-respect. Intuitively, that seems right. One reason is that Katie, presumably, as a privileged person – a company director – otherwise possesses quite strong social bases of self-respect.

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[8] Floris reconstructs the argument as denying that "[p]ersons' sense of self-respect depends on how they are considered and treated by others" (in this volume, 79). However, only an implausibly extreme Stoic position denies this. Humans are social animals. What the argument denies is that *all* (unjust) "unequal relations are wrong [also] because they undermine persons' […] self-respect" (*ibidem*), as Floris makes clear in the remainder of his comment.

However, what if she is being ignored *all the time* (in this volume, 81)? JER merely offers some remarks about what can help us judge the quality of the threat in question, noting that certainly those unjust unequal relations that bar "epistemic access to correct convictions" (JER, 182) classify as relevant threats. That helps deal with cases of norms and individual treatment that fasten onto, and are justified by, pervasively reigning inegalitarian ideologies, such as racist and sexist ones. To know whether these are in play in Katie's case, we would need to know more: is she the only woman on the board? If not, how does the chair treat the others? If there are others, who receive respect and attention, might it be that Katie is being ignored because, when called upon, she tends to go on forever, speaking over others, and tolerating no criticism of her views (if so, that might suggest she was already suffering from low self-esteem before)? In every single case, knowing whether being treated in a problematic – including unjust – way is apt to relevantly undermine the resilience of one's self-respect in requires knowing a fair amount about both the type of person involved and the social context. However, unless we are in possession of firm, reasonably general criteria on these two fronts, this observation simply bolsters Floris' challenge.

Still, we should not give up on the idea of having to draw a line, even if we cannot always say with precision where it is. The cost to autonomy of classifying *all* unjust relations as threats to self-respect is too high. Instead, we can turn our focus to the positive – epistemic and motivational – resources that agents need to withstand at least some threats. Chapter 6 of JER does not focus on these, because the aim of its discussion of self-respect is merely to show that it is not the most general reason to object to inegalitarian norms of social status – that is, instead, their impact on opportunities (see section 1 above). The positive argument is developed at more length elsewhere (Schemmel 2019; 2022). Supplying agents with the epistemic and motivational resources to reliably deal with some threats requires special paying attention to education, whose focus needs to be on developing unconditional basic self-love while discouraging expectations that others will always react to one's traits and actions with praise – or always treat one fairly (Schemmel 2019). It also requires significant support for a free and rich civil society, where agents can find support networks, including resistance networks. These can help them come to terms with, and standing up against, injustice

even if its elimination at source is not yet imminent. Importantly, these networks need not be construed merely as *causal* factors shoring up one's resilience, seen as an exclusively internal, psychological characteristic.[9] We can even regard access to them as (co-)*constituting* the robustness of one's self-respect itself, and still do not have to accept that self-respect is dependent on comprehensive justice (Schemmel 2022).

The reason for this approach is not that seeking to rule out all potentially threatening relations as unjust on grounds of self-respect is too demanding: after all, effectively providing these positive resources *to all* – including the victims of significant injustice – will also be very demanding. The reason is simply that this approach, if successful, provides people with better self-respect. Floris' comment rests on an essentially 'subtractive' picture, where every inegalitarian relation or instance of treatment somehow chips away at one's self-respect, or is at least apt to (in this volume, 82). If that is so, any of them could, in principle, become the straw that finally breaks the camel's back. However, there is no reason to think that this is generally the right picture: self-respect need not be, in all respects, like an armour that is worn out by blows until it eventually breaks. It can also be like a rubber wall, where insults and indignities bounce off, without making any crack at all: if the agent notices them, she will protest the injustice. She might be annoyed, sad, resigned, or even angry – but she will genuinely not perceive them as threatening her worth. Of course, for almost everybody, there will be some critical threshold. We should not indulge in Stoic fantasies about the impregnability of the inner citadel. However, it is worth directing our collective efforts at providing everybody with resources to cultivate this resilience, so understood, and prioritising that effort over avoiding offense to others at all costs, out of fear for their self-respect. It is then not a problem if the question of where exactly to draw the respective lines - between unjust threats to self-respect and 'mere' injustice, or blows to self-esteem that agents have to deal with and those that others should avoid dealing – is, in part, an empirical, socio-psychological one, with answers varying with context.

[9] For relevant criticism of Schemmel (2019) on this point, see Stoljar and Voigt 2022.

## *References (only works not cited in Floris' comment)*

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