

# RELATIONAL EGALITARIANISM, PATERNALISM, ADULTS AND CHILDREN: A PUZZLE

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Relational egalitarianism is a theory of justice according to which people must relate as equals. However, not just any inegalitarian relation is unjust, i.e., the fact that parents do not relate as equals to their children is not unjust. Whereas an adult treating another adult paternalistically is objectionable from the point of view of relational egalitarianism, parent-child paternalism is not. What may explain this difference in judgment? I refer to this as the Puzzle. I discuss four justifications of the Puzzle and argue that none of them is satisfactory. In the final part of the paper, I discuss where this leaves relational egalitarianism as a theory of justice.

## 1.

Relational egalitarianism is a prominent theory of justice according to which people must relate as equals, or at least not relate in an inegalitarian manner (Anderson 1999; 2010; Bidadanure 2016; Fourie, Schuppert, and Walliman-Helmner 2015; Hojlund 2021; Lippert-Rasmussen 2018; McTernan 2018; Nath 2020; Scheffler 2003; 2005; Schemmel 2011a; 2011b; Tomlin 2014; Voigt 2018; Young 1990). Delivering plausible explanations as to why racism, sexism and similar phenomena are unjust, relational egalitarianism has gained widespread support in recent years. Presumably, not just any inegalitarian relation is unjust according to relational egalitarians. The fact that parents do not relate as equals to their children is not unjust. As Lippert-Rasmussen explains,

They [parents and children] do not relate as equals, e.g. parents make decisions on behalf of their children in the child's best interests (and are so permitted by the state), even if these decisions are against their children's

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will. Similar relations between citizens would be condemned by any relational egalitarianism. (2018: 133–34)

These remarks suggest that relational egalitarianism judges the following two situations differently:

*Parent-child paternalism:* The parent treats his child paternalistically by forcing her to eat vegetables, instead of candy, for dinner.

*Adult-adult paternalism:* An adult treats another adult paternalistically by forcing him to eat vegetables, instead of candy, for dinner.

According to Lippert-Rasmussen's remarks, parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable, but adult-adult paternalism is objectionable, from the point of view of relational egalitarianism. Anderson also defends this judgment. She argues that relational egalitarianism "asserts that all competent *adults* are equally moral agents" (Anderson 1999: 312)<sup>1</sup> and that moral agents must relate as equals. If an adult treats another adult paternalistically, they fail to relate as equals because the paternaliser is in effect telling the paternalisee that he is "too stupid to run his own life" (Anderson 1999: 301; cf. Flanigan 2017).<sup>2</sup> What might explain this difference in judgment between parent-child paternalism and adult-adult paternalism from the point of view of relational egalitarianism? Let us refer to this as the *Puzzle*.

This paper investigates whether relational egalitarians qua relational egalitarians are capable of explaining the *Puzzle*. I argue that relational egalitarians cannot explain the *Puzzle* by: (i) arguing that children fall outside the scope of relational egalitarianism; (ii) arguing that parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable due to the type of relationship in which it takes place, that is, relationships of love or relationships of care; (iii) arguing that parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable because relational equality is satisfied as long as people relate as equals over the course of their whole lives. As we will see, the ways in which these fail to explain the *Puzzle* are instructive: either they explain the puzzle in a way that leads to relational egalitarianism becoming implausible, or they fail to provide a convincing reason why parent-child paternalism is relevantly distinct from paternalism between adults. Given this, relational egalitarians seemingly have two options with regard to the *Puzzle*: (a) they concede that parent-child paternalism

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1. My emphasis. By pointing to adults, Anderson clearly means to imply that the requirements of relational egalitarianism do not apply to relationships with children, i.e., a parent treating her child paternalistically is not objectionable from the point of view of relational egalitarianism.

2. Not only relational egalitarians reach this judgment; it is a widespread belief that parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable but that adult-adult paternalism is not. This means that what I say in relation to relational egalitarianism in this paper may apply more widely.

is objectionable in the same way and for the same reason that paternalism between adults is objectionable; or (b) they argue that neither parent-child paternalism nor paternalism between adults is objectionable according to relational egalitarianism. I will argue that relational egalitarians should accept (a) instead of (b), but this comes with a considerable cost. It implies that according to relational egalitarianism, most parents treat their children *pro tanto* unjustly most of the time. This means that my aim in this paper is mostly negative: I point to an inconsistency within relational egalitarianism. But, on the positive side, I also point to how relational egalitarians should modify their theory to avoid this inconsistency.

A few preliminary remarks. I will understand paternalism to be

any act where 1. Agent A attempts to improve the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests, or values of agent B with regard to a particular decision or situation that B faces. 2. A's act is motivated by a *negative judgment* about B's ability (assuming B has the relevant information) to make the right decision or manage the particular situation in a way that will effectively advance B's welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests, or values. (Quong 2010: 80)

However, my arguments in what follows apply to other definitions of paternalism—such as Shiffrin's (2000: 218)—as well.

The justifiability of paternalism may vary by the degree to which (we have considerable evidence that) the paternaliser is competent within the domain(s) in which he paternalises and the degree to which he has the interests of the paternalised person at heart. Similarly, paternalism seems more objectionable the more competent the paternalised person is within the domain of action in which she is interfered with. But what does it mean to be competent?<sup>3</sup> We may distinguish being competent in a local and a global sense. Following Anderson and Claassen (2012: 500), being competent in the local sense is to have competences in relation to a specific activity or area. For instance, they present the case of Laura Dekker, aged 13, who is technically competent when it comes to sailing. She was born on a boat and spent her first four years sailing around the world with her parents and has thus learned sailing at a very young age (Anderson & Claassen 2012: 498, n. 2). Thus, Laura Dekker is locally competent to make decisions about sailing. To be globally competent requires being developed in a social, emotional and in an identity sense (Anderson & Claassen 2012: 500). A person may thus be competent in the local sense while not being competent in the global sense. She may have local competence due to expertise in relation to a given decision, say, when it comes to sailing, yet she may not be fully developed

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3. I thank an anonymous reviewer for asking me to clarify this issue.

in the social and emotional sense and may thus not be globally competent. She would be, as it were, autonomous in a local sense but not in the global sense of autonomous personhood (Christman 1989: 13–14). Conversely, a person may be autonomous in the global sense but not in the local sense, for example, an addicted smoker may not be competent to make local decisions when it comes to smoking but may be competent in the global sense (Christman 1989: 13–14).

I will assume in what follows that one can be objectionably paternalised when one is competent in the local or global sense, for example, the paternaliser may act objectionably by paternalising the person with regard to a decision where the paternalised is sufficiently competent.<sup>4</sup> I will also assume that (there is considerable evidence that) the paternaliser in the examples we consider throughout the paper is (at least) competent in the local sense and has the interests of the paternalised at heart. After all, these factors do not present a principled way to distinguish parent-child from adult-adult paternalism so holding them constant is preferable for our purposes.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, I argue that relational egalitarians cannot explain the *Puzzle* by arguing that children fall outside the scope of relational egalitarianism. Whereas Section 3.1 argues that the *Puzzle* cannot be explained by focusing on the fact that parent-child paternalism takes place within a relationship of love, Section 3.2 argues that neither can it be explained by focusing on the fact that it takes place within a relationship of care. Section 4 shows why the *Puzzle* cannot be explained by appealing to a whole lives version of relational egalitarianism. In Section 5, I argue that relational egalitarians must give up trying to explain the *Puzzle*. Instead, they should concede that parent-child paternalism is objectionable in the same way and for the same reason as adult-adult paternalism. This does not come cheap, however.

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4. In this way, my arguments in this paper are compatible with Anderson and Claassen's (2012) idea of the regime of childhood. As they explain, "a regime comprises the set of norms, practices, institutional arrangements, guiding ideals, criteria regarding thresholds, etc. on the basis of which a particular status is ascribed to individuals ... A regime is constituted by institutionally and culturally backed understandings of what this status licenses bearers of the status to do, what others are obligated or forbidden to do, and so on" (Anderson & Claassen 2012: 508). They are interested in the status of being a child and says that the "The regime of childhood centrally includes tutelage and limited decision-making authority" (Anderson & Claassen 2012: 508). On this analysis, to be a child is to have a special status. However, as they also explain, children who are locally competent can be locally emancipated, i.e., they can get specific exemptions from this status while still remaining under tutelage generally (Anderson & Claassen 2012: 512). Thus, even if we grant that childhood has a special status in this sense (and a status different from adulthood, we may add), this does not explain the puzzle since with regard to some decisions, children may be sufficiently competent in the local sense to be exempted from this status. Note also that my arguments in the paper are in line with Grill's (2020) argument that there is no principled difference between children and adults when it comes to paternalism—the same considerations, well-being and respect for choice, apply in the case of both children and adults (cf. Grill 2018). I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to discuss these issues.

2.

How can relational egalitarians explain that parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable while adult-adult paternalism is not? One suggestion is to focus on the scope of relational egalitarianism. Parent-child paternalism is not objectionable, this explanation suggests, because children fall outside the scope of relational egalitarianism. This means that we do not owe it to children to relate to them as equals. However, since adults do fall under the scope of relational egalitarianism, we owe it to them to relate to them as equals and we fail this requirement by treating them paternalistically (Anderson 1999: 301; cf. Tsai 2018: 351).

According to this explanation, children fall outside the scope of relational egalitarianism because they are not (yet) persons. Only persons are moral equals. As Arneson explains, “all persons share a fundamental equal moral status. All persons simply by virtue of being persons have equal basic dignity and worth” (2015: 30)—a status not shared by non-persons. The requirement to relate as equals on relational egalitarianism *solely* applies between persons and since children are not (yet) persons, we may treat them paternalistically since it is not a requirement that we relate to them as moral equals in the first place.

It is not sufficient merely to claim that children fall outside the scope of relational egalitarianism because they are non-persons and that adults fall inside the scope because they are persons. One must explain what adults possess that makes them persons, and which children lack. According to Arneson, “one potential justification stands head and shoulders above any competitors” (2015: 33). This is what he refers to as the *Rational Agency Capacity Account*. According to this account, what is special for persons is their capacity for rational agency. A rational agent is able to

identify available courses of action she might take, discern reasons for and against the options, weigh and assess the reasons she discerns, deliberate and make choices, carry out the action chosen, and do all this not simply for a single decision problem at a time but with respect to long-term plans of action and projects she might undertake. (Arneson 2015: 33–34)

To be a rational agent is to have these cognitive, affective and volitional abilities at a given level.<sup>5</sup> An explanation of the puzzle would thus be that since children lack the (present) capacity for rational agency, they are not persons, and since only persons fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism, it is not a moral requirement for adults to relate to children as equals. Paternalism in parent-child

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5. As Arneson (2015: 34) explains, an advantage of this account is that it does not assume that there is anything special about being a member of the human species per se. Non-members of the human species qualify for personhood insofar as they have the capacity for rational agency.

relationships is for this reason unobjectionable. Since adults have the capacity for rational agency, they are persons, which means that adults must be treated in accordance with the requirements of relational egalitarianism, that is, that they stand in relations of moral equality to others and must thus not be treated paternalistically (Anderson 1999: 301; cf. Flanigan 2017). For this reason, adult-adult paternalism is objectionable.

The problem is that the *Rational Agency Capacity Account* is unconvincing. Consider again the capacities of a rational agent: ability to identify available courses of action, discern reasons for and against, weigh and assess the reasons for and against, deliberate and make choices, carry out these actions, etc. People do not possess these abilities to the same extent. Some adults are much better than others are in discerning reasons for and against a choice and weighing these reasons. Some adults are much better than others are in carrying out their actions, etc. But since this capacity for rational agency determines personhood in the first place, the following problem arises:

If the fact that I possess greater rational agency capacity than a normal cat or chimp justifies my claim to have a moral status and accompanying moral entitlements greater than they possess, by the same token it would seem that the fact that I possess less rational agency capacity than many other humans would seem to show that I am less morally considerable than they are. (Arneson 2015: 36)<sup>6</sup>

Persons are thus not moral equals because they do not possess rational agency capacity to the same extent. Those who possess more rational agency capacity than others are owed greater moral consideration. This raises a problem for relational egalitarianism. Even if the *Rational Agency Capacity Account* may explain why children do not possess sufficient rational agency capacity to qualify for personhood, such that parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable according to relational egalitarianism, this comes at too great a cost for relational egalitarianism. Suppose Adam and Bert are adults, and that Adam has greater rational agency capacity than Bert. In that case, it would be more objectionable for Bert to treat Adam paternalistically than for Adam to treat Bert paternalistically (cf. Arneson 2015: 40). I take it that any account of relational egalitarianism with this implication is implausible and, thus, this reason does not provide a convincing solution to explaining the difference in adult-adult and parent-child paternalism.

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6. This argument may also be raised against Lippert-Rasmussen's suggestion that "the equality of moral standing of persons is grounded in their capacity to be non-instrumentally concerned with things in a distinctive way, say, one that involves long-term planning" (2015: 51). Clearly, not all adults have the same capacity for being non-instrumentally involved in long-term planning.

A way to avoid this would be to say that on the *Rational Agency Capacity Account*, being a person is a range property in the sense that having rational agency capacity at the threshold qualifies you for being a person, but differences in rational agency capacity above the threshold do not affect personhood status. Given this, it would not be more objectionable for Bert to act paternalistically towards Adam than *vice versa*, assuming that both Adam and Bert have rational agency capacities at or above the threshold level. However, this solution requires an argument as to why differences above the threshold do not matter. It is hard to see what this argument may be, especially once we take into account that the argument must still be able to distinguish persons from non-persons in the first place. Having the abilities of rational agency to a larger extent—for example, being more affectively competent—makes one a more effective rational agent (Arneson 2015: 36). Thus, this creates a dilemma for the *Rational Agency Capacity Account*:

Either the proposed basis [in casu, rational agency capacity] will turn out to vary by degree, and variations above the claimed threshold that establishes equality will give rise to inequality of moral considerability, or the proposed basis will turn out to be one that applies in an all-or-nothing fashion, and then it will turn out that the basis proposed as justifying equal moral considerability is too flimsy or insubstantial to do this justifying work. (Arneson 2015: 42)<sup>7</sup>

Thus, relational egalitarians run into a dilemma if they use the *Rational Agency Capacity Account* to explain the puzzle. We have already seen the first horn, that is, that the capacity may vary by degree in which case paternalism is not equally objectionable towards different adults qua their differences in rational agency capacity. The second horn of the dilemma is to say that rational agency capacity is a range property which means that everyone above the threshold equally qualifies for personhood. This will not solve the puzzle in a convincing way. If we set a low threshold, some, or maybe even most, children will be above the threshold, in which case parent-child paternalism, like adult-adult paternalism, would be objectionable from the point of view of relational egalitarianism. If we instead set a high threshold, some adults may fall below the threshold, in which

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7. Cf. “either we select a property for equal moral standing such that all human beings possess it, e.g. being in a living organism, in which case the group of beings with equal moral standing is implausibly large, e.g. it includes bacteria, or we select a property, e.g. rationality, such that we can exclude implausible candidates for equal moral standing, in which case many human beings do not possess equal moral standing and possibly, some non-human animals, e.g. chimpanzees, do so as well” (Lippert-Rasmussen 2015: 50–51). Arneson (2015) shows that other explanations of basic moral equality, such as Carter’s (2011) and Sher’s (2015), are similarly unable to escape this dilemma. For this reason, I do not explore them here.

case these adults would not fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism. In that case, if other adults treated them in a paternalistic manner, relational egalitarians would be unable to object to this treatment qua relational egalitarians.

The upshot of this section is that relational egalitarianism cannot convincingly answer the puzzle by arguing that children fall outside the scope of relational egalitarianism. Instead, they need an explanation on which children fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism.

### 3.

Instead of arguing that children fall outside the scope of relational egalitarianism, a solution may be to say that it *is* the case that children fall within the scope of relational egalitarianism, but what it takes to relate as an equal to a child is different from what it takes to relate as an equal to an adult. The reason parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable whereas adult-adult paternalism is objectionable is because of the differences in these relationships. Thus, on this suggestion, the requirements of relational equality—of what it requires to relate as equals—differ depending on the relationship in question. That seems intuitively plausible (cf. Lippert-Rasmussen 2018: 173). Let us see whether this may explain the puzzle.

#### 3.1.

The reason parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable according to this suggestion is that it takes place within a relationship of love. Let us assume, following Gheaus, that

personal love is motivated by the individuality of the beloved, given at least in part out of inclination, and, at least to some degree, spontaneously. . . . [it] involves responding to the individuality of the beloved with a robust disposition to care for or be attached to that individual. (2017: 739–742).<sup>8</sup>

Given this understanding, a parent-child relationship is, at least if it is at it should be, a relationship of love. Why would paternalism by a parent towards their child be unobjectionable because it takes place within a relationship of love?

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8. This is a non-relational account of love, as opposed to, e.g., Kolodny's (2003) relational account. My argument in what follows would also apply assuming a relational account of love.



According to Tsai, intimate relationships, such as a relationship of love,<sup>9</sup> “can make a normative difference to paternalism, in virtue of some of the constitutive elements of intimate relationships. These difference-making elements include shared history, mutual knowledge and understanding, joint identification and projects, and reciprocated trust and vulnerability” (2018: 349). As he explains, when we object to paternalism, we typically object to either (i) an objectionable attitude of the paternalisee’s competence; or (ii) the fact that a paternalistic act has as its aim to limit autonomy (Tsai 2018: 351). Inside a relationship of love, these objections will not be present (or would be defeated), even though they would be present (or would not be defeated) in a relationship between strangers. For instance, vulnerability is a constitutive element of a relationship of love. This fact “is non-accidentally related to the fact that it is often not simply unobjectionable or admirable to paternalistically intervene as a friend but also a requirement of being a good friend or lover” (Tsai 2018: 356). In a loving relationship, we lay forward our vulnerabilities and insecurities to the other, and vice versa, because we trust the other. Indeed, “part of what we value in valuing intimate relationships is being in a trusting relationship: a relationship in which the participants are mutually vulnerable to one another in part because they have placed their trust in one another” (Tsai 2018: 356). Being mutually vulnerable also applies to paternalism, but the reason why paternalism in a loving relationship does not convey a disrespectful attitude is that it takes place within a relationship of trust: you trust that your partner acts paternalistically towards you, if she does, because she respects who *you* are. In the same way, the paternalisee may trust that the aim of the paternalistic act is not to limit her autonomy; it is to respond to her vulnerabilities out of a consideration of love. Either this may create additional reasons of beneficence tied to considerations of love to paternalise, or it may not provide an additional reason, but it defeats the presumptive reasons against paternalism (Tsai 2018: 355).

As Tsai (2018: 357) interestingly points out, this shows that paternalism may have a different meaning depending on the relationship between paternaliser and paternalisee. Paternalism if done by a partner may express love but the same paternalistic act may express a condescending attitude if done by a stranger. For instance, signing me up to a fitness center may have a different meaning to me if done by my partner than if done by a stranger. Indeed,

whether the act can actually indicate, reveal, or convey a certain kind of welcome concern or intimacy is not something that is equally available to everyone, but only to special others to whom one has made oneself

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9. I will be using Tsai’s account to discuss relationships of love. As he refers to intimate relationships, it may be that his argument is broader, assuming that a relationship may be intimate without being a relationship of love, e.g., my relationship to my psychologist may be intimate but not a relationship of love.

vulnerable. Paternalistic treatment typical of friendships and loving relationships is often just the expression of the kind of intimacy that we cherish. (Tsai 2018: 357)

Suppose that Tsai is right that paternalism is not objectionable when and because it takes place inside a relationship of love.<sup>10</sup> May this explain the puzzle? It explains that insofar as the parent-child relationship is a relationship of love, it is not objectionable for the parent to treat her child paternalistically. However, there is a problem with this. For A and B to be in a relationship of love, A must love B and B must love A. It is not sufficient that A loves B. If my ex-girlfriend loves me, but I do not love her anymore, we are not in a relationship of love (although we once were). Relationships of love are not unidirectional; they are (at least) two-directional.<sup>11</sup> There must be, in Tsai's terminology, vulnerability on both sides: A must be vulnerable to B and B must be vulnerable to A. That relationships of love are not unidirectional is a problem in the given context because the reason why it is not objectionable for the parent to treat her child paternalistically is also a reason why it is not objectionable for the child to treat her parent paternalistically. Given that parent and child are in a relationship of love, and given Tsai's argument that paternalism is unobjectionable inside relationships of love, the child may unobjectionably treat her parent paternalistically. This means that relational egalitarians would be unable to object to a child treating her parent paternalistically, say, by hiding her chocolates, qua relational egalitarians.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, a child treating her parent paternalistically would be as unobjectionable as the parent treating her child paternalistically. This cannot be right. There is a symmetry in relationships of love which make them unfit as an answer to the puzzle with which we are concerned in this paper.

Note moreover that on this explanation—that paternalism is unobjectionable when it takes place within a relationship of love—children are not special. Adult-adult paternalism is also unobjectionable on this explanation as long as it takes place inside a relationship of love. Suppose that Cam and Dan are friends (they are in a relationship of love). If Cam were to sign Dan up for a fitness center because he believes Dan is getting too lazy and that it is bad for Dan to be so lazy, this would be unobjectionable because they are in a loving relationship.

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10. If he is not right, his explanation will not help relational egalitarians explain the *Puzzle*. Thus, I leave aside potential criticisms one may raise against Tsai's account, e.g., perhaps paternalism by a partner may sometimes be even more insulting than if done by a stranger because she knows me and thus I cannot set aside her intervention as a matter of lack of knowledge on her part in the way I can if done by a stranger, e.g., "sure, this stranger paternalises me because he believes I am bad at taking care of myself, but I know that he is not right and that his action stems from a lack of knowledge about *me*."

11. Or, multi-directional if there are more than two parties in the relationship.

12. Note that this would be the case even when it comes to very young children.

The child-adult relationship is thus not special when it comes to paternalism, given this explanation of the puzzle. As it would be objectionable for an adult stranger to treat another adult paternalistically because they are not in a loving relationship, likewise would it be objectionable for an adult stranger to treat a child paternalistically.

### 3.2.

The symmetry in relationships of love is thus what makes this explanation—that paternalism is unobjectionable in relationships of love—unconvincing as a solution to the puzzle. We need a relationship that is (more) asymmetrical. This may be the case for relationships of care. Love and care are different. Whereas we saw that love according to Gheaus is motivated by the individuality of the beloved, “caring for someone is a disposition to benefit that person, disposition which is not necessarily motivated by the individuality of the cared-for and that could, instead, be entirely motivated by duty” (2017: 740). The relationship between a teacher and her pupil is, or ought to be, a relationship of care, but it is not a relationship of love. Relationships of care are, as opposed to relationships of love, unidirectional. A and B are in a relationship of care if and only if A is disposed to benefit B but not necessarily because of B’s individuality *or* B is disposed to benefit A but not necessarily because of A’s individuality. In fact, the only if clause may be too strong. It may also be a relationship of care if A is disposed to benefit B but not necessarily because of B’s individuality *and* B is disposed to benefit A but not necessarily because of A’s individuality. What distinguishes care from love is that the disposition to benefit does not necessarily stem from the cared-for’s individuality, but this need not take a unidirectional form. However, this conjunctive understanding of relationships of care would entail symmetry and would thus run into the same problems that relationships of love did for which reason it would be unable to deliver a plausible explanation of the *Puzzle*. Thus, for these reasons, I assume that the only if clause is true: that relationships of care are unidirectional. Note that this in itself may be an objection to this solution to the puzzle, but I set this aside.

Schroeder’s (2020) explanation of why parental paternalism is unobjectionable may be understood in this light. Parental paternalism is unobjectionable due to the relationship in which it takes place, namely a committed, forward-looking relationship of influence. He explains,

parents live lives that intersect with their children closely and repeatedly in ways that make them bound to have effects on their children’s choices, identity, and character. This is the sense in which they are relationships

of influence. They are forward-looking, because this relationship of influence is expected and understood to endure far into the future. And they are committed, because the prospect of an enduring relationship of influence is not just an expectation, but also a commitment on the part of the parent. (Schroeder 2020: 10)

As the influencer in this relationship, the parent is expected to be committed to help shape their child to become self-authored. The parent is in a position to act such that they support their child's autonomy by helping to shape the child's self. Parents

are in a position to educatedly act in ways that they are in a position to anticipate comport with their child's true choice, even though their child may herself not yet, or at least not at the time, be in a position to see how that is so. (Schroeder 2020: 10)

As an example, Schroeder points to how Tiger Woods's father Earl Woods by paternalising Tiger to play golf from an early age helped to shape Tiger into, not only the golfer who he is, but also the person who he is (2020: 11–12). Parental paternalism is thus unobjectionable when and because it takes place within a committed, forward-looking relationship of influence that enables the child to become the author of their own life (Schroeder 2020: 10).

Schroeder's explanation may solve the puzzle in the following way. Parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable because it takes place in a committed, forward-looking relationship of influence. However, two adults do not usually stand in this kind of relationship to each other. For this reason, adult-adult paternalism is objectionable. Is this a satisfactory explanation? I believe not. First, there is an ambiguity in Schroeder's account. He explains that parental paternalism is unobjectionable because by taking place inside committed, forward-looking relationships of influence, the paternaliser enables the paternalisee to become (to a higher degree) autonomous, the author of their own life. However, there are two components here: (i) it taking place inside a committed, forward-looking relationship; and (ii) the paternaliser by paternalising enables the paternalisee to become (more) autonomous, to be the author of their own life. These two components may come apart. A dying parent may paternalise his child into becoming the author of her own life—by telling her that he thinks she should start writing to become an author because that is her dream—but he is clearly not in any straight-forward sense in a committed, forward-looking relationship with her that “is expected and understood to endure far into the future” (Schroeder 2020: 10). The fact that the father's paternalism may efficiently shape his daughter into becoming an author seems to have more to do with backward-looking considerations,

that is, that he has been an influential figure in her life up until this point. So, it is not clear what is ultimately doing the work in Schroeder's account.

Second, even if Schroeder's account is convincing as an explanation of why parental paternalism is unobjectionable, it is clearly not convincing as an explanation of the puzzle. Schroeder's explanation overgeneralizes in a problematic way for relational egalitarians. Note that on Schroeder's account, parent-child paternalism is not special. What makes paternalism permissible is that it takes place inside committed, forward-looking relationships of influence wherein paternalism may make the paternalisee more autonomous. But there are many examples of relationships of this kind. As Schroeder explains,

since permissible paternalism is grounded in committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence, there will be similar grounds for permissible paternalism wherever there are committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence, and many grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, mentors, and coaches are indeed engaged in committed, forward-looking, relationships of influence with their grandchildren, nieces and nephews, students, mentees, and athletes. (Schroeder 2020: 12–13)

The problem with explaining the puzzle by using Schroeder's account is that adults may also be in committed, forward-looking relationships of influence. A university teacher may be in such a relationship to one of her students whom she paternalises to pursue an academic career because she believes it will make her student more autonomous in the long run (and thus be better for her).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, a psychologist may be in such a relationship with her adult patient. Suppose the psychologist from their many sessions knows that her patient is in a mentally abusive relationship. The psychologist has unsuccessfully tried to convince the patient to end the relationship; the patient does not want to end the relationship because she is in love with her partner. By paternalising her through appealing to fear—by saying to the patient that staying in the relationship may lead to her

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13. There is a difference, one may argue, between cases in which the paternaliser has some special responsibility for the welfare of the paternalisee and cases in which the paternaliser does not. The former are welfare cases, whereas the latter are non-welfare cases. The vegetable case with which we started is a welfare case while the university teacher paternalizing her student may be a non-welfare case, and it is not clear that these cases can be justified in the same way. Indeed, it may be that it is easier to justify paternalism in welfare cases than in non-welfare cases. Even if we assume that is true, it cannot provide an explanation of the puzzle. This is the case since an adult paternalising another adult may also be a welfare case, e.g., the psychologist-patient and doctor-patient cases mentioned below. Thus, there is no principled difference between children and adults in this regard. This is also to say that the question of whether paternalism is easier to justify in welfare cases than in non-welfare cases is orthogonal to the question posed in the puzzle. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, we do not have to settle the former question. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this.

getting physically beaten by her partner—the psychologist may influence her to end the relationship and become more autonomous. Finally, consider the doctor-patient relationship. Suppose a doctor paternalises his patient to take a pill which will make her more autonomous. This constitutes and shapes the patient’s future self in the sense that the person she will become having taken the pill is different from the person she would have been had she not taken the pill. A similar case would be the doctor paternalising the patient to undergo a surgery which the doctor believes is good for the patient, but which the patient does not want.<sup>14</sup>

We may infer two things from these remarks. First, Schroeder’s explanation opens up for permissible paternalism in psychologist-patient, doctor-patient, university teacher-student and other relationships between competent adults. However, it is usually believed that paternalism in these types of relationships is impermissible. This is most clearly the case when it comes to doctor-patient relationships. In his discussion of paternalism, Groll introduces the case of Bob, who is in need of an operation which he does not want, and says the following:

I assume everyone agrees about what Bob’s doctor should do. The decision primarily concerns Bob and his health, so the doctor ought to respect his will and not perform the surgery, even if she thinks it would be good for Bob to have it. (2012: 692)

As is clear, Groll assumes that everyone agrees that the verdict in this case is clear: it is not permissible for the doctor to paternalise Bob. According to Schroeder’s account, this form of paternalism may be permissible. Even if Schroeder’s account would have provided a convincing explanation of why parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable, it would come at too high a price for relational egalitarians to accept this explanation. Second, Schroeder’s account may not even provide an explanation of the puzzle since paternalism between adults may be permissible on his account. Thus, in some situations, Schroeder’s account would treat parent-child and adult-adult paternalism similarly. For these reasons, Schroeder’s account cannot provide a solution to the *Puzzle*.

This generalizes, I believe, further than Schroeder’s account; it generalizes to explanations that would try to solve the puzzle by appealing to relationships of care. Even if parent-child paternalism is permissible because it takes place

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14. One may argue that this is a case of coercion, and not a case of paternalism. Note, however, that given Quong’s definition—which I presented in the introduction—a paternalistic act may be coercive. If I coerce B to eat vegetables (condition 1) because I do not believe that he would do so if I left the decision to him (condition 2), I am acting paternalistically towards B and my act is coercive. Similarly, even if the doctor’s act is coercive in this case, it is also paternalistic since the doctor attempts to improve the welfare of the patient (condition 1) because she believes that the patient will not make the decision that will effectively advance her welfare (condition 2). I thank an anonymous reviewer for asking me to clarify this.

inside a relationship of care, this explanation overgeneralizes in a problematic way since, as we have seen, there may be relationships of care between adults, in which case appealing to these types of relationships do not solve the puzzle. We have to look elsewhere for a solution.

#### 4.

We have seen that relational egalitarians cannot solve the puzzle by arguing that children fall outside the scope of relational egalitarianism. We have also seen that trying to explain the puzzle by focusing on the relationships in which parent-child paternalism takes place—relationships of love or relationships of care—is unsuccessful. Let us instead in this section explore whether we may explain the puzzle by focusing on how time bears on what it requires to relate as equals. Lippert-Rasmussen explains that we may distinguish the following two views on how time bears on what it takes to relate as equals:

*The complete-lives view:* X and Y relate as equals in their dealing at  $t$ , if (1) when considering how X and Y relate to one another over the course of their whole lives, it is defeasibly true that X and Y relate to one another as equals; and (2) at  $t$ , X and Y are both aware that (1).

*The time-relative view:* X and Y relate as equals in their dealing at  $t$ , if (1) when considering how X and Y relate to one another at  $t$ , it is defeasibly true that X and Y relate to one another as equals; and (2) at  $t$ , X and Y are both aware that (1). (2018: 131)<sup>15</sup>

The two views differ. Suppose Adam and Bob are in a relationship. Adam paternalises Bob for twenty years after which Bob paternalises Adam for twenty years. Whereas Adam and Bob relate as equals over the course of their whole lives—they are paternaliser and paternalisee for the same amount of time—they do not relate as equals according to the *time-relative view* since at no  $t$  is it true that they relate as equals. At any given  $t$ , Adam or Bob paternalises the other.

The *complete-lives view* may explain why parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable from the point of view of relational egalitarianism. As Lippert-Rasmussen explains,

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15. In Lippert-Rasmussen (2019: 154), he defines them as *Whole lives relational egalitarianism* and *Time-relative relational egalitarianism*. Whereas on the former, “justice requires that, from the perspective of their lives as a whole, people relate socially to one another as equals,” on the latter they must relate socially to one another as equals at any given moment. According to Lippert-Rasmussen (2018: 134–35), Anderson (1999) supports the *time-relative view* whereas Scheffler (2015) supports the *complete-lives view*.

Arguably, one explanation [why parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable] appeals to the fact that, initially, each of us was a child in someone's care such that, from a whole-lives perspective, our having had others acting paternalistically on our behalf in our childhood (if we were lucky) involves no objectionable relational inequality. (2018: 134)

According to this explanation, we all experience being treated paternalistically as children so when we evaluate everyone's lives as a whole, no one is inferior in this regard to others. However, that is not the case for adults for which reason adult-adult paternalism is objectionable given the *complete-lives view*.

There are two problems with this explanation of the puzzle. First, it is not necessarily true that adult-adult paternalism is objectionable given the *complete-lives view*. Suppose everyone was paternalised throughout their lives as a whole in the same way that children are usually paternalised. In that case, people would relate as equals to one another over the course of their whole lives (at least in this regard). Second, building relational egalitarianism solely on the *complete-lives view* is implausible (Bidadanure 2016: 245, 255). Suppose Carr is white and Derek is black. For the first half of their lives, Carr treats Derek in a racist manner whereas Derek does not treat Carr in a racist manner; for the second half of their lives, Derek treats Carr in a racist manner, but Carr does not treat Derek in a racist manner. Suppose this extends throughout society between blacks and whites. Assuming the *complete-lives view* on how time bears on what it takes to relate as equals, relational egalitarians qua relational egalitarians cannot object to this society although it is filled with racism since everyone, when considering their lives as a whole, relate as equals.<sup>16</sup> Given that racism is a paradigmatic case of relational inequality according to relational egalitarians (Anderson 1999: 312; Anderson 2010: 59; Lippert-Rasmussen 2018: 86), the *complete-lives view* is unacceptable. For these reasons, appealing to the *complete-lives view* does not provide a convincing explanation to the puzzle.<sup>17</sup>

## 5.

What may explain that parent-child paternalism is unobjectionable and that adult-adult paternalism is objectionable according to relational egalitarianism?

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16. We could imagine similar cases of domination, exploitation, sexism, slavery, etc.

17. Note that we could not solve the puzzle by combining the *complete-lives* and the *time-relative view*, i.e., for X and Y to relate as equals they must relate as equals throughout their lives considered as a whole *and* they must relate as equals at any given moment in their lives. Given the time-relative component, adult-child paternalism is objectionable from the point of view of relational egalitarianism.



We have seen that it cannot be explained by the fact that children fall outside the scope of relational egalitarianism. We have also seen that it cannot be explained by the kind of relationship in which parent-child paternalism takes place—relationships of love or relationships of care. Finally, we have seen that it cannot be explained by appealing to a complete-lives view of relational egalitarianism. What, then, should relational egalitarians do?

There are, at least, three options for relational egalitarians. They may: (i) provide a different explanation of the puzzle; (ii) concede that parent-child paternalism is objectionable in the same way and for the same reason that paternalism between adults is objectionable; (iii) argue that neither parent-child paternalism nor paternalism between adults is objectionable according to relational egalitarianism. Starting with (i), it is hard to see what that explanation may be. The four explanations discussed so far may prove instructive in this regard. We have seen that these explanations either explain the puzzle in a way that leads to relational egalitarianism becoming implausible, or they fail to provide a reason why parent-child paternalism is relevantly distinct from paternalism between adults. It is hard to imagine an argument capable of explaining why parent-child paternalism is relevantly distinct from paternalism between adults while at the same time not turning relational egalitarianism into an implausible theory of justice. Thus, option (i) does not seem to be a viable solution.

Turning to (ii), relational egalitarians may concede that there is no relevant difference between parent-child and adult-adult paternalism: paternalism in both cases is objectionable because paternaliser and paternalisee qua the paternalistic treatment fail to relate as equals. A potential advantage of this solution is that some forms of raising children seem better than others. As Lippert-Rasmussen says, “one would expect relational egalitarians to favor non-authoritarian family relations over authoritarian ones” (2018: 121). In accepting (ii), relational egalitarianism is able to explain why non-authoritarian family relations are better than authoritarian ones, that is, the former contains less paternalism than the latter. However, this at the same time makes relational egalitarianism vulnerable in the sense that it implies that parents would always act in one sense objectionably when treating their children paternalistically. I take it that most parents do not believe that they are doing anything objectionable, not even in *one* sense, when they are forcing their children to eat vegetables, instead of candy, for dinner. Perhaps this bullet is worth biting given options (i) and (iii), but before we are able to say whether that is the case, we must explore option (iii).

The third solution is to argue that neither parent-child paternalism nor paternalism between adults is objectionable according to relational egalitarianism. It was a mistake to assume, from the beginning, that paternalism between adults is objectionable according to relational egalitarianism. This investigation may have taught us that we should not be too rigid in assuming that pater-

nalism between adults is always objectionable qua leading to, or constituting, relational inequality. For instance, we should not necessarily assume that paternalism is objectionable when it takes place within relationships of love between adults. Paternalism may sometimes be the proper way of acknowledging the partner's fears and insecurities. However, this investigation has also taught us that it would be wrong to say that paternalism in relationships between adults is *never* objectionable according to relational egalitarianism. Clearly, paternalism may involve an objectionable attitude of the paternalisee's ability to choose how to lead his life. Suppose I am sitting in a train and a stranger is sitting beside me reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*. If I intentionally spill my tea over his book to make it unreadable because I believe he would be better off not reading *Fifty Shades of Grey*, I have an objectionable attitude of his ability to choose how to lead his life. In this case, paternalism should be judged objectionable from the point of view of relational egalitarianism. This extends to many other cases of paternalism as well. Thus, accepting (iii) would be highly costly to relational egalitarians.

The upshot is that accepting (ii) entails that parents would always act in one sense objectionably when treating their children paternalistically, for example, by forcing them to eat vegetables instead of candy for dinner, according to relational egalitarianism; while accepting (iii) entails that relational egalitarians would not be able to object to paternalism qua relational egalitarians. Given these options, it may be that (ii) is the most plausible way forward for relational egalitarians. Still, it would imply that most parents treat their children *pro tanto* objectionably most of the time and this is implausible. Moreover, this may extend to other issues. If relational egalitarians qua relational egalitarians cannot justify a child being treated paternalistically differently from an adult being treated paternalistically, it may be that the same is true with regard to democratic rights. In that case, relational egalitarianism would possibly entail that inasmuch as adults should have the right to vote, children should have the right to vote as well. Exploring whether my arguments extend to such issues—and thus exploring how revisionary relational egalitarianism is with regard to common state practices—is a task for future research.

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