**Against selection: educational justice and the ascription of talent**

Abstract: This essay starts from the observation that the issue of talent, in relation to the problem of distributive justice, can be approached from two different angles. First, it is common to discuss the justificatory function of talent, that is, its role in the justification of educational or social inequalities. In addition, however, this essay proposes to look at practices of talent ascription and their causal role in the distribution of educational prospects. These practices tend to exacerbate educational inequalities due to social background, especially when they are tied to selective educational settings. There is reason to avoid talent-based selection in education, in order to contain the negative effects of practices of talent ascription.

The notion of talent figures in widely discussed accounts of distributive justice, such as John Rawls’s principle of fair equality of opportunity, or Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift’s meritocratic conception of educational justice that is inspired by Rawls’s principle:

> An individual’s prospects for educational achievement may be a function of that individual’s talent and effort, but it should not be influenced by her social class background. (Brighouse & Swift, 2008, p. 447)

This conception mentions three factors influencing educational achievement: talent, effort, and social background. It is assumed that those educational inequalities due

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1 Rawls (1971, p. 73) introduces this principle as follows: ‘[W]e might say that those with similar abilities and skills should have similar life chances. More specifically, assuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system.’ Note that while Rawls uses the concept of talent here, he also speaks of people’s ‘abilities’, ‘skills’, and ‘natural assets’. He also makes clear here that he regards effort (‘the willingness to use’ one’s talents) as a legitimate source of inequality.
to talent and effort are legitimate – but not those due to social background. Within this framework, then, the notion of talent plays a role in the justification of distributive inequalities. I call this its justificatory function.

The issue of talent, in relation to questions of distributive justice, can also be approached from another angle, namely by looking at practices of talent ascription. In educational contexts, we lack direct access to people’s talents, but often ascribe talent (or lack of talent) to students. This is done in educational everyday practice as well as when important decisions regarding students’ educational or professional future are taken – that is, when they are selected for specific educational programmes, schools, or school types on the basis of an ascription of talent or ability. As I would like to make clear in this essay, practices of talent ascription are morally problematic, in part with regard to their distributive effects. The upshot is that regardless of how we understand the notion of talent and its justificatory function in a theory of distributive justice, the moral problems of practices of talent ascription are so serious that we have reason not rely on them to ground the distribution of educational prospects. The ascription of talent cannot and should not be avoided, in educational contexts. What can be avoided, however, is setting up selective structures within which educational benefits are allocated on the basis of talent ascriptions.
In the first section, I outline how the justificatory function of talent is seen, in recent liberal debates on distributive educational justice. The second section addresses the issue of talent ascription, while the third section spells out the argument against selection.

**Talent – its justificatory function**

As already mentioned, talent has a justificatory function in the meritocratic conception of educational justice, where it is named as one of the legitimate sources of educational inequality. In Brighouse and Swift’s – as well as Rawls’s – view, this means that people with equal talents should have equal educational prospects. It is thus unjust when equally talented students do not have access to the same educational institutions, or are not provided with the same amount of educational resources, due to differences in social backgrounds. In this reading, the meritocratic approach does not amount to the idea that the talented have a moral claim to be educationally or socially privileged over the less talented. It does not require us to spend more resources on the talented than on other groups, or to establish special educational programmes for their benefit.

Apart from that, neither Rawls nor Brighouse and Swift see the meritocratic principle as the only principle in their conception of (educational) justice. Starting with Rawls, liberal theorists have questioned the justificatory role of talent in theories of distributive justice. The main line of critique is that talent itself is ‘undeserved’, in the sense that talented people have done nothing to bring it about, and therefore cannot take

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2 I will not consider libertarian or conservative positions on this issue, but restrict myself to the liberal debates that have their origin in John Rawls’s work on distributive justice (Rawls, 1971).
credit for it. They are not more responsible for their talent than they are for their family background. Both (natural) endowment or talent and the conditions of upbringing are – to use Rawls’s expression – ‘arbitrary from a moral point of view’ (Rawls, 1971, p. 65), and cannot justify educational or social inequalities.

There are several ways to take up this critique of the justificatory role of talent in the development of principles of educational justice. The first approach has been labelled ‘luck egalitarianism’, as it makes the justification of inequality dependent on whether it is due to brute luck, or to responsible decisions and actions (e.g., Arneson, 1989; Cohen, 1989). As talent is a question of luck, it cannot justify educational inequalities. Effort, by contrast, seems to be rooted in people’s responsible decisions. One possible formulation of the luck egalitarian conception of educational justice is, then, that

\[ \text{an individual’s prospects for educational achievement should be a function of that individual’s effort, but it should not be influenced by her social class background or her level of talent. (Brighouse & Swift, 2014a, p. 17)} \]

This ‘radical’ conception – as Brighouse and Swift call it – requires a neutralization of all educational inequalities due to natural talent: students with different talent should all have the same educational prospects. It must be further clarified what is meant by an equality of educational prospects. One possible reading is that all students who show equal effort should reach the same level of achievement, regardless of their talents. This view raises both moral and practical problems, as it seems to demand that talented students should be held back in the development of their potential. This might be seen as morally problematic
if it means we deny students an education that fits their specific needs (Merry, 2008). It is also questionable in practical terms: denying students appropriate conditions of learning in the school context might not hinder them from promoting their abilities outside of this context, for example by reading books by themselves. So, it is not clear that it is even possible to hold students back from developing their potential.

There are other ways to specify the luck egalitarian approach in education. It all depends on what it is that is to be equalized – it might not be achievement, but resources, opportunities, or educational quality (Calvert, 2014). Focusing on one of these alternatives makes the account less ‘radical’ than the version just outlined. For instance, the demand to provide students with equal educational resources, irrespective of talent and social background, leaves room for talented students to reach a higher level of ability and to benefit from their talent, especially with regard to competition for social positions.

Even the ‘radical’ interpretation of the luck egalitarian account, however, might be considered as not radical enough. When we go one step further, we arrive at what Brighouse and Swift (2014a) call the ‘extreme’ egalitarian view, or what Tammy Ben-Shahar (2016) – who defends this position – characterizes as ‘all-the-way-equality’. According to this conception, only strict equality of educational outcome can count as legitimate. There is an obvious argument for this move, given the Rawlsian view on ‘moral arbitrariness’: it can be argued that especially in children, effort is not primarily a question of personal decisions, but is more likely due to natural preconditions and family background. Clearly, a student’s motivation and ambition are highly influenced by
attitudes towards education that are transmitted within the family. We can come to the conclusion that not only are those inequalities due to talent and social background unjustified, but also those rooted in effort. There is no room, then, for legitimate inequalities of educational achievement.

Ben-Shahar’s argument for strict equality focuses on the ‘positional’ value of education. In the competition for attractive social positions, the value of education for one person is positional in the sense that it depends on how well others are educated. Being better qualified than others matters, in this regard, irrespective of one’s actual level of achievement. The worse qualified are worse off simply due to their relative position in the distribution of education. Against this backdrop, Ben-Shahar claims that only strict equality of achievement can be considered fair, as any inequality can put the worse off in a disadvantaged position. She explains, in addition, that ‘prioritarian’ views developed on the basis of Rawls’s difference principle must come to the same conclusion, as regards the distribution of positional benefits (see also Brighouse & Swift, 2006). According to the difference principle, social and economic inequalities are legitimate to the extent that they benefit the worst off. As Ben-Shahar writes,

> when positional goods are concerned, equality will always benefit the worst-off and is therefore justified from a prioritarian point of view. Inequality in education could never be justified by a principle of priority [...], simply because there is no possible case in which unequal educational outcome would be better for the worst-off than equality. (2016, p. 87)

In Rawls’s view, positional inequalities due to talent and effort are legitimate. Rawls
develops the difference principle to complement the principle of fair equality of opportunity, as a remedy for its shortcomings. As indicated, Rawls acknowledges the moral arbitrariness of the natural distribution of talent. However, he refuses to react to it by endorsing a luck egalitarian or even more extreme principle. Instead, he claims that the difference principle should be applied on the basis of the (meritocratic) principle of fair equality of opportunity. This amounts to the view that the naturally talented should be allowed or encouraged to develop their potential, but should at the same time be required to use it for the benefit of all, especially the worst off in society. Talent should not be considered as people’s individual property, but as a ‘common asset’ (Rawls, 1971, p. 101).

So, while the meritocratic principle demands that equally talented people should be treated equally, in education, the difference principle might be used to determine how groups of equally talented people should be treated compared to each other. As Rawls puts it,

> the difference principle would allocate resources in education, say, so as to improve the long-term expectation of the least favored. If this end is attained by giving more to the better endowed, it is permissible; otherwise not. (Rawls, 1971, p. 101)

The difference principle, then, gives us reason to provide special attention to the ‘least favored’ – those with little talent. We might try to improve their (educational) situation by spending additional resources on them. Gina Schouten (2012) has proposed, in her prioritarian approach to educational justice, that with regard to children with serious natural learning disabilities, we should not focus on making them (positionally) competitive, but should enable them to develop capacities that contribute to their
flourishing, more broadly understood. However, directly promoting the education of the worst off might not always be the best way to benefit them, if we follow Rawls; they might be benefitted by providing special educational attention and resources to the ‘better endowed’, who are thereby enabled to develop their potential to the advantage of everyone in society. After all, the less talented depend on the talented developing their potential and taking on important responsibilities in society, for instance as political or economic leaders or as scientific or artistic innovators. Some inequalities in education might be justified, then, if they ultimately work out to the advantage of the worst off in society. Brighouse and Swift go one step further, when they say that ‘[w]e should also be willing to sacrifice meritocratic principles where it is necessary to benefit the less advantaged, all things considered’ (Brighouse & Swift, 2008, p. 463). They propose giving up the meritocratic demand to treat equally talented people equally, if this is to the advantage of the worst off in society.

We have seen, so far, two different ways to deal with the weaknesses of the meritocratic principle – it can be transformed into a more demanding egalitarian principle, or complemented by a prioritarian account. In the debate on educational justice, the critique of the meritocratic idea has also led to a type of approach that turns away from the demand for distributive equality, favouring instead a notion of relational (democratic, civic) equality, combined with the demand for a ‘sufficient’ or ‘adequate’ education (Anderson, 2007; Satz, 2007). The basic idea is that all people should be enabled to reach a threshold level in the development of relevant capacities that enables them to live as
equals, in the liberal democracy, and is in this regard adequate. Within this framework, the notion of talent lacks a justificatory function, as the standard of adequacy applies to everybody, regardless of natural or social preconditions. The adequacy view accounts, in some sense, for the view that both types of disadvantage are undeserved. However, it does not require social and natural disadvantages to be fully neutralized. It demands equality with reference to a given threshold, not strict equality of outcome. Inequalities above the threshold are seen as legitimate, irrespective of how they come about: they might be the result of unequal financial resources, or differences in natural endowment. In this view, then, promoting the talented and thereby creating significant educational inequalities might be legitimate.

To sum up, then, the liberal debate on educational justice provides us with some room for privileging talented people over others. However, it is widely understood that talent in itself does not form the basis of a moral claim for social reward. Also, there is a general view that inequalities due to social background are to be reduced. Given that there are in fact vast social inequalities in education, there is likely to be wide agreement among adherents of different distributive principles that improving the situation of the socially disadvantaged should be one of the main aims of education policy.

**Talent ascription as a moral problem**

Let us now turn to the second issue mentioned in the introduction – the moral problem of talent ascription. It is natural that talent is ascribed to students, by teachers, other students, or their parents. To ascribe talent means to make assumptions regarding students’ potential
It is to assume what they can or will learn, under the right social and educational circumstances. These ascriptions might refer to how fast and easily students learn new things, but also to the level of achievement they can be expected to reach, given their willingness to make an effort. Sometimes the concept of talent is used to depict the highly gifted, while other usages are more broad, referring to all kinds of students and their potential. Typical usages rely on a distinction between talent and effort, as related to actual levels of achievement. We might speak about someone as being talented, but lacking the effort to develop her talents, and thereby explain this person’s poor level of achievement. We might also say that someone who performs poorly while making a huge effort lacks talent. While statements of this kind are common, especially in selective school settings, they can be highly problematic.

A first point is that it is not clear that talent is, as is often assumed, an innate and fixed property of human beings. Clearly, people’s natural endowment influences their capacity for learning. But should we say that it is naturally determined from the outset what capacities a person can acquire, and what level in the development of these capacities she can reach? It has been claimed that a person’s talent is partly due to social factors (see Meyer, 2014). Israel Scheffler (1985, p. 11) speaks of the ‘myth of fixed potentials’, assuming that in the course of a life, new potentials can arise, while others can vanish. He assumes that a person’s potential is neither naturally nor socially determined, but evolves through their individual agency in a symbolically structured world (see also Benner, 1987).
To question the innate and fixed character of talent does not mean that talent ascriptions, as ascriptions of learning potential, are to be considered as altogether inappropriate. It only means that by ascribing talent we do not refer to fixed properties, but to individual traits that have partly been brought about by social and educational experiences, and are likely to further evolve. Talent ascriptions, then, cannot be considered to be definite judgements about people’s potential, but only as short-term predictions that are tied to a specific educational context: Teachers will typically have some competence in predicting whether a student can be successful within the educational environment they know and help shape.

The question of what talent ‘is’ and how it evolves must be distinguished from the epistemic question of how it can be identified in students. Even if we assume that there are fixed talents, it is not clear how they can be tracked. The problem is that what we experience (or measure) are students’ actual performances, not their talents. We take their performances as an index for their capacities and/or their talents. It should be pointed out, furthermore, that measuring performance is itself unreliable, as success or failure in a test is strongly shaped by the type of test itself, and the conditions of testing. In testing students, we find out how they perform in a particular test situation.

There is, then, a general epistemic issue here that can be considered one of the sources of a specific form of injustice in selective educational practices. It is widely documented that children from socially privileged backgrounds are more likely to be accepted in schools or programmes for talented students. This is the case, for instance, in
the selective school systems of the German-speaking countries, where socially
disadvantaged students are strongly under-represented in the most demanding school type
(the Gymnasium) (see, for example, Baumert & Schümer, 2001; Baumert, Stanat, &
Waterman, 2006). It can also be observed in programmes of gifted education (Card &
Giuliano, 2016; Peters & Engerrand, 2016; Grissom & Redding, 2016). One explanation
for this phenomenon is that children from privileged families perform better in school,
presumably because they are more able or ‘talented’. This is what is sometimes
characterized, following Raymond Boudon (1974), as one of the primary effects of social
background. It is explained with reference to differing social or educational experiences of
children within the family. To cite an example often used by Harry Brighouse and Adam
Swift (2014b), well-educated parents tend to advantage their children by reading bedtime
stories to them.

In selection processes, however, there are also so-called secondary effects of social
background (Boudon, 1974): students from different backgrounds who show similar levels
of achievement are treated differently. This might be explained in a variety of ways, for
instance by pointing to the fact that students or their parents make different educational
choices depending on their social background. I would like to focus on another factor (that
might be indirectly linked to parents’ or students’ choices), namely, the ascription of talent
by teachers and other professionals within the education system.3 There is reason to

3 Bos et al. (2004) have shown, in an empirical study, that teachers’ recommendations at the
end of the fourth school year – which serve as the basis for the allocation of students to the
different school types in the German system – are significantly influenced by factors that
have nothing to do with ability or performance.
believe that practices of talent ascription are permeated by prejudice, stereotypes, or bias – to use the different terms that have become common in ethical debates on race and gender. Recently, feminist theorists have drawn on psychological research to shed light on specific kinds of bias that women and other social groups face (esp. Fricker, 2007; Anderson, 2012; Saul, 2013). In the educational context, girls have long been seen as a disadvantaged group, and there is still debate on girls’ performance in areas such as mathematics that are stereotyped as ‘male’. However, nowadays, it is not girls but socially disadvantaged and immigrant children that seem most disadvantaged in the education system. Also, there is concern regarding the educational achievement of boys who are often considered as less ambitious than girls.

Stereotypes are best understood as ‘widely held associations between a group and an attribute’ (Fricker, 2007, p. 31). This means that they entail ‘some empirical generalization about a given social group’ (ibid.). In our case, the attribute in question is academic ability or talent, or the lack thereof. Some groups – such as the socially disadvantaged – are seen as less talented than others. Stereotypes can play out as explicit ascriptions, but in educational contexts, they are more likely to occur as an implicit form of bias. This means that teachers may explicitly deny having such stereotypes, but nevertheless be influenced by them in the ascription of talent (Anderson, 2012, pp. 167–168; Brownstein & Saul, 2016).

One interesting empirical finding is that people (for example teachers) who are committed to the idea of fixed talents are more susceptible to be biased in their talent
ascriptions. These people tend to think that talent is something that you have or lack, and they relate this notion to the idea that some groups are by nature more talented than others. By contrast, those who do not think of talent as a natural limit to individual development seem less prone to stereotypical talent ascriptions (Levy et al., 1998; Steele, 2010, pp. 168–169). In this way, then, the (implicit) theory of what talent ‘is’ can become effective in practices of talent ascription, regardless of which theory is adequate.

Talent ascriptions influenced by stereotypes are epistemically wrong, in that they fail to appropriately represent the true potential of students. It is more difficult to say whether or in what sense they are morally wrong. It would be clear if teachers were intentionally disadvantaging some groups of students, and had explicitly degrading attitudes towards them. Mostly however this is not the case. Many teachers only want the best for all their students, whatever their social background, ethnicity, colour, or sex. Many of them try to overcome their implicit bias. It is dubious, then, whether they can be morally blamed for their epistemically wrong judgements.

Nevertheless, it might be seen as appropriate to say that some students are morally wronged by biased talent ascriptions. For one, it could be suggested that these ascriptions are in themselves morally wrong, irrespective of possible consequences. One way to elucidate this view is to say that students are wronged when their true potential is not recognized. They are, then, not taken for what they are, and what they are able to do. This seems especially troubling when the reason is their belonging to a disadvantaged group. We might also say that students are wronged when they are not treated in accordance with
the merit-based rules of educational practice: if a selective decision is set up as based on achievement, you are treated unfairly if you are excluded from an attractive programme or school due to factors that have nothing to do with your talent or performance.

Biased talent ascriptions might also be morally wrong because of the negative effects they can have on a person’s individual development or career. In a general way, it can be empirically expected that negative talent ascriptions have a negative effect on the students’ learning processes, whether they are epistemically accurate or not. If these effects exist, it is questionable what empirical accuracy means in this regard, as the ascription itself possibly changes what the student can or will learn.

A related issue is that widely held stereotypes – whether teachers explicitly communicate them or not – can have an effect on learning, to the extent that they are internalized by learners. This is what is characterized as stereotype threat in social psychology (Steele, 2010). For instance, when girls take up the view that girls are bad at maths, this will eventually influence their performance in this field. To describe this phenomenon, we might also use Sally Haslanger’s notion of discursive construction (Haslanger, 2012): the ascription of certain traits causally brings them about, as the ascriptions are endorsed by the people themselves. This creates a ‘feedback loop’, as these individuals start acting correspondingly, and the said traits are further ascribed to them.

Against this background, we can view the distributive effects of practices of talent ascription. The basic claim is that practices of talent ascription themselves tend to exacerbate social inequalities in education. There are two ways in which this can happen.
First, practices of talent ascription might refer to traits that are socially brought about, and second, the judgements themselves might be distorted by bias.

It might well be that the ascription of talent to people adequately captures some traits that they in fact possess. The problem is that these traits – whether we speak of ‘capacities’ or ‘talents’ – might themselves have developed through social and educational processes. By ascribing talent to some students, then, we might react to social privileges that these students have had so far in their lives. This might positively impact their development, as their self-esteem and motivation is improved. To the extent that talent ascriptions are relevant for selective decisions, being labelled as ‘talented’ can go along with further advantages: in programmes or schools specially set up for the talented, these students can be appropriately challenged, and provided with learning opportunities that fit their educational needs.

In addition, the ascription of talent might be epistemically inadequate in the sense that it misrepresents the traits or potentials of students as a result of implicit bias. Here, students’ social disadvantage does not stem from their actual traits, but from their belonging to a social group which is subject to negative stereotypical ascriptions of talent. Group membership, then, triggers a biased reaction on the part of teachers. As outlined, biased talent ascriptions can have further consequences, and eventually impact students’ future performance and the development of their capacities. This is especially the case when students adopt stereotypical ascriptions of talent (or lack of talent) to their own social group, and are influenced by them in their performance.
To sum up, talent ascriptions might be morally problematic in a variety of ways. First, they might be seen as wronging people, regardless of their effects on them. Second, they might be considered as harming people in their learning processes. Third, they can be seen as having problematic distributive effects.

**Against selection**

In my further considerations, I draw on my rough conclusion from the first section, and bring it together with my remarks about practices of talent ascription in the second section.

Educational inequalities due to social background, prevalent across our societies, are considered morally problematic by adherents of different liberal conceptions of educational justice. There is widespread agreement that the impact of social background on educational achievement ought to be reduced. As has become clear, practices of talent ascription tend to play a causal role in bringing about certain distributive effects that are commonly seen as problematic. These practices tend to exacerbate educational inequalities due to social class and family background in two different ways. First, they react to traits and performances that are already influenced by social background, and second, they may themselves be biased.

Even if we uphold the idea of talent as innate and fixed, then, we might think of practices of talent ascription as distorting educational justice. Consider again the meritocratic principle in which the notion of natural talent obtains a justificatory function regarding the distribution of educational prospects. As defenders of this principle, we might assume that treating students differently due to differences of talent is legitimate,
but nevertheless acknowledge that practices of talent ascription are among the social factors that tend to undermine meritocratic justice.

How should we react to this moral problem? A natural idea is to address the issue on the individual level. If it is true that teachers are often epistemically incorrect in their ascription of talent, partly due to their biased view of students, they should improve their ability to make talent assessments first and foremost. In the first place, this means that teachers should rid themselves of their biases towards certain social groups. It might be demanded, in this regard, that teacher training should focus on this point, enabling (future) educators to make appropriate judgements of their students’ abilities or talents.

As practices of talent ascription are a constitutive aspect of teaching, improving individual diagnostic competence is crucial. The question is whether it is enough. Consider, in this context, the debate on epistemic justice, and in particular Miranda Fricker’s account of what she calls ‘testimonial injustice’ (Fricker, 2007). A person is victim of testimonial injustice, in Fricker’s view, when she is not considered to be credible in what she says due an ‘identity prejudice’ towards her as a member of a disadvantaged group. Clearly, testimonial injustice – being about credibility and knowledge – differs from the injustice at work in talent ascription. But the two are also related, as both involve the assessment of people’s competence or ability. Supposedly, the very same

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4 Krassimir Stojanov (2016) has a different view: he claims that students are victims of testimonial justice in Fricker’s sense when their potential is underestimated. The educational significance of Fricker’s account is also discussed by Ben Kotzee (2013, 2017).
groups who are victims of testimonial injustice are also systematically underestimated in their talent.

In Fricker’s view, is mainly up to the individual to overcome her prejudice: people should reflect on their prejudiced judgements, and try to correct them. They should develop specifically epistemic virtues. However, as prejudice often works unconsciously, as implicit bias, it is especially difficult to detect and correct (Anderson, 2012; Alkoff, 2010). Elizabeth Anderson states that we cannot fully rely on the epistemic improvement of individuals, but must also address the problem on the structural level. Anderson identifies social inequality, combined with the segregation of social groups, as the main structural source of epistemic injustice. She recommends policies to foster social integration, including the provision of better educational opportunities for marginalized groups (Anderson, 2012, pp. 169, 171; Anderson, 2007). These are structural measures thought to fight prejudice in society.

The proposal that I would like to make is not set up to *extinguish* biased talent assessment, but to reduce its role. As indicated, talent ascription becomes especially consequential with regard to the distribution of educational prospects when it is tied to selective educational structures, that is, institutional settings that stipulate a distribution of educational opportunity on the basis of talent or ‘merit’. By abolishing – or not establishing – selective settings in education, the negative impact of talent ascription with regard to educational justice might thus be contained.
Where selective schools or programmes exist, teachers cannot escape an assessment of students’ talent and their fitness for a particular programme. In this way, their alleged bias tends to influence students’ (and their parents’) decision-making, especially when it confirms widespread social views of particular social groups, and students’ or parents’ own view of themselves. By releasing teachers from the duty of selecting students on the basis of talent ascription, we allow them to shift their focus – from the identification of the talented to the question of how talent in all students is best promoted.

At this point, defenders of selective schooling might bring up another structural proposal, namely, that access to selective programmes should be regulated on the basis of anonymous tests that exclude the impact of bias. As the experience shows, for example in German-speaking areas where such tests regulate access to the Gymnasium, this kind of system does not significantly reduce the impact of social background on educational success. One reason is, of course, that the level of achievement (or ‘talent’) at the time when the test is taken is already influenced by the social conditions of the student’s upbringing. Another reason is that members of disadvantaged groups who might in fact be able to pass the test may refuse to take it. This is in part due to teachers failing to encourage them to take it, or they themselves underestimating their own abilities or talents. As the work on stereotype threat shows, individuals might also underperform in the test itself due to a biased view of their own ability.
Conclusion

In the liberal debate on distributive justice, it is widely agreed that being talented does not go along with a direct claim for educational or social advantages. It is also commonly understood that educational inequalities due to social background ought to be reduced. As has become clear in this essay, practices of talent ascription tend to exacerbate such inequalities, especially in connection with selective educational settings. It can therefore be seen as a moral imperative to minimize the impact of talent ascriptions on the distribution of educational prospects by refraining from the establishment of selective programmes or schools.

References


