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Educational Justice and the Justification of Education

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The debate on educational justice is often conceived as a debate on distributive patterns. However, if we talk about distributive justice, we have to clarify what—namely, what type of good—is to be distributed. In the case of educational justice, the answer seems clear: the good in question is education.

However, this answer does not suffice. Two further questions arise, at this point. The first question is widely recognized as crucial to the theory of educational justice: What is it that is to be distributed—educational resources, opportunities, outcomes, or something else?

In what follows, I will focus on a second question. This question can initially be taken as a conceptual issue: What do we mean by the concept of education? It is common to distinguish a general sense of the term from a more specific meaning. Understood in a general sense, education refers to schooling and to processes of teaching and learning. The question is whether all processes of learning are educational. Even according to an unspecific understanding of the term, certain instances of learning, such as learning to play billiards, might fall outside the conceptual sphere of education. We must at least say that the debate on educational justice is not concerned with the distribution of skills in billiards.

Instead of discussing this issue on a conceptual level, we could directly turn to the normative question: Is billiards worth being taught at school? My basic claim is that an account of educational justice cannot be agnostic or neutral with regard to questions of this kind. In other words, it cannot avoid the question of which types of education are worthwhile. Referring to the English philosopher of education Richard Peters, we can call this the problem of justification.

Peters addresses this problem in his book *Ethics and Education* and the essay "The Justification of Education". He asks why "[s]cience, mathematics, history, art, cooking and carpentry feature on the curriculum [but] not bingo, bridge and billiards" (Peters 1966, p. 144). In his attempt to answer this question, Peters starts from conceptual considerations: He outlines a specific concept of education based on the distinction between education and training. Like the German term *Ausbildung*, training refers to the development of specialized skills that are useful to fulfil particular tasks. In contrast to this, education or *Bildung* expresses a non-instrumental understanding of learning. It is often assumed that being edu-

cated is valuable in itself, and not with regard to some external purposes. There are various ways to specify this notion of education. Peters' account focuses on cognitive capacities: The educated man, he says, "possesses a considerable body of knowledge together with understanding [...] He has developed the capacity to reason, to justify his beliefs and conduct" (Peters 1973/2010, p. 87). Peters' idea is that this account of education can be gained through conceptual analysis, but must be justified by further considerations.

I do not intend to go into the details of Peters' conceptual analysis and his justificatory approach, but let me briefly indicate how Peters attempts to justify education. Roughly put, he says that anyone who brings forward a rational argument against education thereby presupposes its value. Since education has to do with reasoning and justification, the value of education is implied by any discursive denial of its value. This transcendental argument has mostly been rejected, and Peters himself found it unsatisfactory in later years (Peters 1983). In a recent paper, Stefaan Cuypers (2012) proposes re-formulating Peters' justificatory account in perfectionist terms. His idea is that the specific notion of education or *Bildung* can be justified as a core feature of the good life. A perfectionist justification of education will be challenged by political liberals. Thus, a further question is whether *Bildung* can be justified on political liberal grounds.

Some types of education are widely acknowledged as valuable because there is an obvious instrumental justification for them. One type of instrumental justification refers to the positional value of certain capacities. In competitions for jobs or social positions, it might not suffice to be well-trained or well-educated; one has to do better than the other competitors. In these cases, the value of one's education depends on the others' level of ability. First, I would like to focus on the positional significance of education and its obvious relation to the issue of justice. Second, I consider education in its non-instrumental value. In the third part, I discuss two different types of justification for the non-instrumental aspects of education: civic and perfectionist accounts.

Fair Competition and the Justification of Education

Let us consider, first, the so-called meritocratic principle of educational justice, as formulated by Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift: "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). Nothing is said here about educational aims or the value of education. The message is that, whatever is taken as an educational aim, the prospects for achievement should be equal for persons with the same (natural) talent and the same willingness to develop their talent. I do not claim that Brighouse and Swift would subscribe to the view that considerations of educa-

tional justice are fully independent of the problem of justification. I only observe that the meritocratic principle seems to be neutral with regard to educational aims.

It should be noted that this principle traditionally plays a specific role in theories of justice: It is designed to regulate the fair distribution of social positions. In other words, it is taken to guarantee equality of opportunity in the competition for social status. However, considered in this light, it is obviously wrong to say that the meritocratic idea is neutral with regard to educational aims. Imagine, for instance, that our school systems focused on activities such as bingo, bridge, and billiards; schools would thus ensure that persons with equal talent and motivation for these games have equal prospects for achievement. Yet we would consider this to be unjust because it does not enable students to develop those abilities or types of knowledge that are relevant in the competition for social positions.

What are these abilities and types of knowledge? This depends on the particular circumstances in a society – namely, which abilities are factually valued in society and the labour market. Consider a society in which it is taken for granted that only eminent chess players qualify as political or economic leaders. When applying for a leadership position, you would have to play chess against other candidates for the job. Under these social circumstances, chess would have to be among the core subjects in school: It would be unfair not to do the best to support every student in becoming a good chess player.

Peters asked for justification as to why some subjects feature in the curriculum while others – “bingo, bridge, and billiards” – do not. The scenario just outlined provides a clear-cut justification for including chess in the curriculum: Being able to play chess is positionally valuable in the competition for leadership positions. To be successful in the competition for social status, you have to play better than others. There could be other types of justification for introducing chess as a school subject; for example, chess playing could be seen as an intrinsically valuable activity or as instrumentally valuable with regard to learning mathematics. Yet if we concentrate on the problem of fair competition, these possible justifications do not matter.

It could be suspected that the focus on fair competition is at odds with the demand for education – as contrasted to training: Acquiring useful skills seems to be much more important in the competition for status than being educated, in the sense outlined by Peters. However, it is not that simple. When we look at the selective school systems in Germany or Switzerland, we see that the school type traditionally committed to *Bildung* (i.e., the *Gymnasium*) still provides good opportunities in the competition for social rewards. The *Gymnasium* enables students to acquire a diploma that ensures them access to higher education. Moreover, it endows them with certain types of attitudes, capacities, and knowledge that – although apparently useless – might nevertheless prove to be useful in the competition for status: Being able to read Goethe’s *Faust* or understanding the meaning of Kant’s categorical

imperative is—to borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s term—a form of cultural capital that allows its owner to distinguish himself from the uneducated members of lower classes. In this perspective, education or *Bildung* is seen exclusively in its instrumental, positional value. If we rely on the meritocratic principle of fair competition, we have to conclude that, in a society in which *Bildung* is in fact competitively salient, access to *Bildung* should not be influenced by social circumstances. However, if society ascribes no competitive value to this kind of education, there is no reason to include it in the curriculum.

Within this framework, the aims of education must be derived from the conditions of competition in a particular social setting. This means that virtually anything can be justified as an educational aim if it proves to be relevant in social competitions. The meritocratic principle—as well as any other principle designed to regulate social competitions—is not tied to a particular set of aims, but it is not independent from considerations of justification. The education system can only count as just if it promotes the right type of capacities or forms of knowledge. On the other hand, certain curricular contents are justified with reference to the purpose of securing fair competition.

Unfortunately, these insights do not provide us with a clear-cut answer to the question of how the relevant type of education is to be distributed. The problem is that any sort of educational inequality is likely to be positionally salient. Should we stipulate strict educational equality? According to the meritocratic view, inequalities due to social background—but not inequalities of natural endowment—should be neutralized. Inequalities of effort are not seen as unjust, even if they are caused by social circumstances. Many adherents of the meritocratic view, it appears to me, are somewhat uneasy about this distinction between justified and unjustified inequalities. After all, natural inequalities are not more deserved than inequalities of social background.

Undoubtedly, the problem of fair competition must be addressed. I think that significant inequalities of educational resources are likely to spoil the fairness of social competitions. Moreover, legal and informal forms of discrimination within the school system are, in my view, morally unacceptable.

Educational Justice and the Non-Instrumental Value of Education

The type of justification considered thus far leads to a distorted—or at least incomplete—picture of education and its value. Even those aspects of education that are commonly seen as non-instrumentally valuable are reduced to their instrumental, positional value. Moreover, the reasons for promoting non-instrumental forms of education depend on the conditions of social competition in a particular society. In a society where *Bildung* is competitively irrelevant, there is no reason to educate young people.

In our societies, it is controversial whether and to what extent the school system should be committed to the non-instrumental aspects of education. This is why Peters tried to develop a justification for education. Such justification is independent of considerations of justice, but I claim that a theory of educational justice must rely on an account of the value of education. If there is no value in being educated (and not only trained), it does not matter, from the perspective of justice, how education is distributed among individuals. However, if the value of education—and a certain type of educational aims—can be justified, this might change the way we consider the problem of distribution.

My idea is this: Once it is acknowledged that everyone should be educated in a certain way and achieve certain aims, the primary question is whether all students equally reach these aims. Thus, the question is not whether an equal amount of resources should be spent on them or whether all students—or all students with equal talent—reach the same level of achievement.

Consider Brighouse and Swift's remarks on the non-instrumental aspects of education:

"[E]ducation is valuable not only for competitive reasons; in addition to improving career prospects, it independently improves individuals' lives by enabling them to engage in a wide range of intrinsically valuable pursuits, such as reading good literature and discussing it with friends, playing complex games, entertaining themselves with mathematical puzzles, and socializing with people who speak other languages. This 'intrinsic' value of education typically contributes significantly to the quality of life" (2008, pp. 462–463).

In the last sentence, the authors present a justification for including literature, complex games, mathematics, and foreign languages within the curriculum: These pursuits are intrinsically valuable and contribute significantly to the human good. In other words, educational aims might be justified with reference to the idea of the good human life.

According to Brighouse and Swift, the meritocratic principle should be applied not only to the instrumental benefits of education, but also to its intrinsically valuable aspects. Persons with equal talent and motivation should have the same prospects to be initiated into intrinsically valuable activities. As previously noted, Brighouse and Swift's formulation of the meritocratic principle does not refer to educational aims. Yet these authors do claim that activities such as reading literature significantly contribute to a person's quality of life. The question is, then, whether they see commitment to the human good as an integral aspect of educational justice.

If they do so, they should also acknowledge that it is of primary importance to enable every person to achieve these aims. This means that, everybody should have an effective opportunity to develop the capacity to read and enjoy good novels. Some students might have difficulties acquiring this capacity because they are disadvantaged by their natural endowment or their family circumstances. In either case, it seems crucial to support them in learning to read literature simply because this enables them to have a good life.

Thus, focusing on educational aims leads to an account of educational justice that is clearly distinct from the meritocratic idea. The meritocratic principle can be satisfied if (1) students are educated for the wrong aims, (2) all students equally fail to reach an appropriate level of achievement with regard to the relevant aims, and (3) the naturally disadvantaged are not supported in achieving these aims. The main shortcoming of the meritocratic conception is that it does not ensure an appropriate education for all students.

Against this backdrop, I would like to turn to the adequacy view of educational justice, as presented, for instance, by Debra Satz. Satz's account is concerned not only with patterns of distribution, but also with educational aims. In contrast to egalitarian accounts, it involves the insight that a substantial conception of education is an integral part of an account of educational justice.

Satz claims that the education provided by the democratic state should be "adequate for democratic citizenship and for relations of civic equality" (2007, p. 647). I propose reading this as a justification for a certain type of education. According to Satz, educational aims are justified "with reference to the idea of equal citizenship" (ibid., p. 635). As she notes, "[w]e can derive, in general terms, the nature and content of educational adequacy from the requirements of full membership and inclusion in a democratic society of equal citizens" (ibid., p. 636). This is a justification of education that differs fundamentally from the one presented by Brighouse and Swift. It is not the human good that justifies certain educational aims, but the principle of civic equality.

As Satz points out, this principle determines not only the aims, but also the level of education that should be reached by all students: Everyone should be educated up to a certain threshold level of achievement. As soon as we think of educational justice in terms of educational aims, it is natural to introduce the notion of a threshold that is set by these aims. You can reach a certain aim or fail to reach it. Consider the the capacity to read literature: In the development of a person's reading skills, there comes a point when he or she becomes able to read good books. This is the threshold that everyone should reach (if reading novels is valuable).

We should think of the threshold level as a platform: Once a person has reached this platform, he or she has the opportunity to refine his or her capacities, especially by using

them. For example, in terms of the capacity to participate in public debates, education enables students to acquire the basic capacities for discursive communication. By participating in the political discussions, they constantly improve their abilities in this field.

Let us turn back to the question of how educational aims can be justified. Satz, to be sure, does not work with the distinction between intrinsically and instrumentally valuable aspects of education. Yet she makes it clear that functioning as an equal citizen requires more than a narrow form of training (Satz, 2007, p. 637). In what follows, I will focus on determining to what extent the civic account is apt to justify those aspects of education that go beyond the preparation of students for the labour market and the competition for social status.

I will also discuss whether the civic account should be preferred to justifications that rely on a notion of the human good. I will start by considering this latter type of justification and then return to the civic account.

Civic Standing and the Human Good

What about justifying education or *Bildung* with reference to the good? It must first be noted that various types of education might be instrumentally valuable in promoting the good, such as by enabling persons to get an interesting job. However, apart from this, being educated is often conceived as non-instrumentally valuable. According to Brighouse and Swift, education is valuable because it introduces us into intrinsically valuable pursuits, which implies that the specific ideal of education might be justified by arguing for the intrinsic value of certain activities. Yet “bingo, bridge, and billiards” might also be conceived as intrinsically valuable pursuits that contribute to the quality of life. After all, games are usually played for their own sake. Brighouse and Swift mention complex games in their list; they might be thinking of chess, not bingo.

According to Peters, games like bingo are not educational because they are not connected with knowledge, reasoning, and understanding. Stefaan Cuypers (2012) agrees with Peters on this point. He also shares Peters’ view that a hedonistic justification of education is not fully convincing (ibid., p. 5). Instead of turning to a Kantian transcendentalist strategy, as Peters did, Cuypers proposes proceeding within a perfectionist framework: “*Perfectionism* is a type of objective list theory which maintains that, besides pleasure and desire-satisfaction, some excellences or ‘perfections’ [...] are intrinsically valuable” (ibid., p. 9). Thus, three elements are essential for the perfectionist approach: objective value, intrinsic value, and the reference to excellences or perfections. Cuypers describes hedonism as a subjective theory of the good (ibid., p. 10).¹ However, hedonism highlights pleasure as a good that is valuable

¹ Both Peters and Cuypers include desire-fulfilment theories among the hedonistic theories (Cuypers 2012, p. 10). Desire-fulfilment theories are subjectivist in the sense that value is tied to subjective desires.

independently of whether it is being valued. In this sense, it is an objectivist account of the good. It is subjectivist in the sense that value is tied to subjective experiences. Kirsten Meyer's approach to the good is subjectivist in this latter sense, without being hedonistic. According to Meyer, certain activities (e.g., reading a good novel) can be intrinsically valuable because they enable us to make particular experiences that cannot be reduced to mere pleasure (Meyer 2011, p. 103). The objective value of these subjective experiences provides a justification for education. Like hedonism, Meyer's account is objectivist in one sense and subjectivist in another.

Cuypers does not intend to argue for the value of particular intellectual activities or the experiences connected with them. In line with Peters' view, he thinks that to justify education means to justify the intrinsic value of knowledge and justification. Cuypers claims that knowledge is objectively and intrinsically valuable. As he points out, he is not committed to a narrow type of perfectionism that grounds objective values in an account of human nature, but to a broad perfectionist view that is rooted in "everyday moral judgements" (Cuypers 2012, p. 12). As Cuypers claims, we intuitively endorse the view that someone who spends his time playing videogames—or the games mentioned by Peters—without caring for literature, history, science, or mathematics is far from living a life that is truly worthwhile.

The question is how a broad perfectionism of this type addresses the problem that persons disagree with regard to objective values and the value of knowledge in particular. It is not only contested whether the education system should promote a reason-based type of education, it is even more controversial that adults' flourishing essentially depends on reading good novels and doing mathematics. Many people conceive of their lives as worthwhile, although they do nothing of the kind. How are we to justify education for those people?

Two problems must be distinguished here. The first problem is why the state should have an obligation to promote a certain type of education that is not generally recognized as valuable. It is clear that there is no public obligation to foster people's skills in billiards. Thus, if someone thinks that a significant difference does not exist between playing billiards and reading a novel, he or she will be opposed to the idea that tax money should be used to foster students' understanding of literature.

Cuypers (*ibid.*, note 4) distinguishes formal from substantial desire-fulfilment theories and claims that the latter comes close to hedonism because it focuses on the feeling of desire-satisfaction.

The second problem is whether it is justified that education, in its non-instrumental aspects, should be compulsory for everyone. Even if we hold this kind of education to be rationally justified, we might think that other normative considerations, such as respect for persons' autonomy, are more important. Respect for autonomy involves, in this context, that persons are not coerced to engage in activities that they do not themselves appreciate. In the case of adults, it is mostly agreed that they should not be forced to read good novels, even if doing so would do them good. However, from a perfectionist point of view, it is not fully clear how this anti-paternalistic attitude is to be justified. With regard to children and adolescents, paternalistic interventions are more readily accepted. Yet it should be asked why the public school system should initiate children into certain practices that many people do not see as core features of a good life.

Political liberals have argued against privileging a particular conception of the good in the public school system. Their considerations are primarily concerned with the religious and ethical diversity in modern societies, not with the debate on *Bildung*. Yet if *Bildung* is contested and is justified in perfectionist terms, it is not clear – from a liberal point of view – why the state should promote this kind of education instead of concentrating on those competences and forms of knowledge that are uncontested.

Let us turn to the second type of justification mentioned earlier: justification based on the idea of full citizenship. According to Satz, "citizenship requires a threshold level of knowledge and competence for exercising its associated rights and freedoms – liberty of speech and expression, liberty of conscience, and the right to serve as a jury, vote, and participate in politics and in the economy" (2007, p. 636). To participate in politics, persons need the capacity to think critically about public issues. Such civic education clearly requires more than training. However, Satz refers mainly to the public activities of citizens. It is not clear whether her account involves the initiation of students into practices such as literature and art. Moreover, nothing is said about the capacity for autonomy in personal matters. Traditionally, *Bildung* has often been linked to the capacity for personal autonomy.

Satz's conception of citizenship comes close to Rawls' notion of political autonomy. As Rawls states in his *Political Liberalism*, children should be educated for political autonomy, but not for ethical autonomy.² He conceives of ethical autonomy as a core feature of a liberal conception of the good that – according to his view – should not be privileged in the education system of the liberal state. The civic account promoted by Satz seems to be compatible with a Rawlsian political liberalism; it does not presuppose a particular conception of the good, but is based on the normative idea of equal civic standing. This idea is widely recog-

² In the passages, where he makes his statement on education (Rawls 1993, p. 199), he implicitly refers to a previously made distinction between political and ethical autonomy (*ibid.*, pp. 77–78), but does not mention the terms.

nised as fundamental to the liberal democratic order, which is why it seems promising to take it as the basis for the justification of education. However, it is dubious whether all the relevant aspects of education can be justified in this way. Should we accept the view that certain educational aims can only be justified in perfectionist terms? I think that there is room to enrich the civic conception of education:

One reason for initiating students into cultural practices such as literature or art is that future citizens should be enabled to feel at home in the cultural world in which they live. This is a precondition for conceiving oneself as a fully fledged member of the political community. Thus, everyone should get an idea of what a novel is and what it means to read a novel. Yet this does not mean that everyone should see the reading of novels as an essential part of his good life.

Imagine that you come to live in a cultural community that is radically different from the one in which you grew up. If you want to belong to that community, you will first have to learn the language of this cultural group and the various codes of behaviour that guide its members in their everyday lives. In addition, it will be necessary for you to acquire a fundamental understanding of the more sophisticated cultural practices of this community, such as drama, songs, religious worship, and philosophy.

A second point is highlighted by Martha Nussbaum in her writings on education. Nussbaum thinks that schools should foster what she calls “the narrative imagination”: “This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” (Nussbaum 2010, pp. 96–97). According to Nussbaum, initiating students into literature and art can help foster the development of this ability that she sees as essential for democratic citizenship. Citizens should be enabled to develop understanding and sympathy for others and show genuine concern and respect for them. According to this approach, becoming acquainted with literature and art is an important aspect of people’s moral and political development.

Nussbaum’s point refers exclusively to individuals’ role as citizens. In line with Rawls, she thinks that the justification of personal autonomy as an educational aim would have to rely on a perfectionist (or comprehensive) form of liberalism—that is, on a controversial conception of the good. According to Nussbaum, promoting personal autonomy in schools must be seen as an expression of disrespect towards those students who are opposed to the liberal account of the good life.³

In contrast to Nussbaum, I think that an education for personal autonomy can be justified in non-perfectionist terms—namely, as an aspect of fully fledged citizenship. It is

³ Nussbaum writes: “We will not say that autonomy makes lives go better in general. [...] We will also not say that it is better to offer arguments for your view than to hold it out to faith” (2011, p. 36).

widely accepted that having equal standing as a citizen means, among other things, having the normative authority to live in accordance with one's own conception of the good. This idea lies behind Nussbaum's claim that students with non-liberal or irrational views should be respected.⁴ The demand to respect individuals in their own views presupposes that individuals have views of their own. To use a term common in the current debate on autonomy, it presupposes that their views are authentic. It is pointless to respect students' religious views if such views are not authentic. Therefore, it does not seem to be sufficient to respect students in the views that they already have as these views might have been forced upon them by their parents or the social group to which they belong. Students must be enabled to develop their own conception of the good. In other words, they should become autonomous with regard to their personal affairs. Here we must distinguish between the autonomous choice of a form of life and the choice of an autonomous life. The claim that non-autonomous or non-liberal forms of life should not be denigrated, in the liberal democracy, is compatible with the view that students should develop the capacity to choose their own form of life.

This leads me to a final point: Being autonomous with regard to personal matters presupposes that a person is aware of different options of the good. Thus, the individual should be informed about various religious and ethical views. Moreover, he or she should come to know that activities such as reading novels might contribute to the quality of life. Consider, for instance, a working-class child whose parents do not read novels and who has no access to good books. Were we to stop teaching literature in public schools, this child might never even get in touch with good books and never have the opportunity to start caring for them. This argument is perfectionist in the sense that it is grounded in considerations about the good. However, I think that it is compatible with political liberal ideas because it does not presuppose that a life without literature, art, or philosophy is not worth living. Initiating students into certain cultural and intellectual practices with which they might otherwise not become acquainted expands children's future opportunities for choice.

Concluding Remarks

In this presentation, I made three related claims. My basic claim is that the issue of distributive educational justice is related to the problem of the justification of education. It is not enough to determine patterns of distribution; which kind of education is to be distributed must also be clarified. It is pointless to provide everyone with a fair share of something that has no value. Considerations about the value of education as well as certain educational aims should be seen as an integral part of an account of educational justice. I would say

⁴ Nussbaum grounds her version of a political liberalism on the principle of equal respect. See also Lar-
more (1999).

that an education system should not be considered as just if it promotes the wrong type of capacities or forms of knowledge.

My second claim is that focusing on educational aims has consequences for the problem of distribution. For instance, if we hold that all students should become autonomous, our primary concern must be that everyone has an effective opportunity to develop the relevant capacities. Yet further considerations must be made to ensure fairness in social competitions.

My third claim is that the justification of education should start from the normative idea of equal civic standing. The question is then what kinds of capacities are tied to the status of citizenship. I think that a broad conception of civic education should lie at the heart of an account of educational justice.

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