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**Thresholds and Relationships: A Debate on Educational Justice**

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## 1 Introduction

After I published my first essay on educational justice in 2007 – *Was heisst Bildungsgerechtigkeit?* (What is educational justice?) – I received an email from someone who introduced himself as Krassimir Stojanov. He had some questions and criticisms, and also wrote that he saw this as the first step in a long-term discussion between us. Since then, we have regularly referred to each other's positions in our writings and kept the debate alive. I appreciate that very much, because it is not so common in German philosophy of education to argue about real issues in a precise way. It is more common to identify oneself as a member of a 'camp' or 'school of thought' and to fight (but mostly ignore) other camps. So, I would like to thank our hosts today for making this event possible – an event that will hopefully help us to better understand where our positions really differ and where we have common ground.

Briefly after he had first contacted me, Krassimir (Stojanov, 2008; republished in Stojanov, 2011) published his own essay in which he criticised the threshold conception I had developed in my paper and took steps to address the issue of educational justice from the perspective of (Axel Honneth's) theory of recognition (Honneth, 1994). I see it as the main (and also most interesting point) of Krassimir's work in this field that he has developed an alternative to the classical (broadly Rawlsian) theories of distributive justice that dominate the debate on educational justice.

Within the distributive paradigm, the first question is *what* exactly is to be distributed, and the second is *how* it is to be distributed. Naturally, it is 'education' that stands for distribution – Harry Brighouse et al. (2018) use the term 'educational goods' to refer to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that students should acquire. They also discuss different principles of distribution (equality, adequacy, benefitting the worst off), which provide different answers to the question of how educational goods should be distributed.

The alternative to this kind of account might be characterized as 'relational' – focussing on the quality of relationships between persons,

not on the goods provided to them. Honneth's account is concerned with attitudes of recognition as well as the self-relationship of individuals – that is assumed to evolve in a positive or healthy way when individuals are recognised by others. More recently, Krassimir (Stojanov, 2020a; 2022) has also referred to Miranda Fricker's account of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) to make the point that educational justice should be understood in non-distributive terms.

In the relational perspective, then, the main objection to a threshold (or adequacy) conception is that it fundamentally misconceives the kinds of injustice that occur in education: The main injustice is not that some students lack basic skills and knowledge, but that there is – in one way or another – a lack of recognition or respect for learners.

In the first part, I limit my considerations to the distributive paradigm – focusing on the debate between egalitarian and adequacy accounts. I briefly outline an adequacy conception that includes two thresholds. The second part turns to the relational critique of this conception.

## 1 Two Thresholds

Let us begin with a rough formulation of a threshold conception of educational justice: Everyone should – if at all possible – have a kind and level of education that enables them to enter the labour market, to participate in democratic processes and to make their own choices in their personal lives.

An adequacy conception of this kind refers to (three) different spheres (the economic, the political and the personal) and requires further specification as to 1) what kinds of skills and forms of knowledge and 2) what level of education should be considered 'adequate' (or 'sufficient') in each of these spheres.

I would like to emphasise several advantages of such an adequacy account over distributive-egalitarian accounts – accounts according to which education (educational goods) should, in one way or another, be distributed equally among individuals.

The *first* point is that, in my view, the lack of a basic kind of education should be seen as the core educational injustice. The lack of basic skills seems morally more serious than any form of educational inequality between individuals who have all achieved a basic level of education.

*Second*, distributive equality (even strict equality of achievement) does not guarantee that individuals are in any way 'adequately' educated:

Equality may be achieved at a low level, or it may be ensured in terms of skills or forms of knowledge that are not relevant or valuable. Speaking of educational goods (as 'distribuenda' in an account of distributive justice) addresses the second issue – but even if we can rely on a conception of educational goods, it is still possible to achieve equality by 'levelling down'.

*Third*, talk of distributive equality is by itself relatively meaningless, as most proponents of egalitarian accounts go on to defend some sort of inequality. For one, it must be decided what exactly it is that is to be distributed – for instance, educational opportunities, resources or outcomes: Should individuals merely have the opportunity to acquire educational goods, or should it be ensured that they in fact possess them? Is the education system just if the same amount of resources is spent on each individual – as it is more or less the case in the German system?

Moreover, some principles of equality do not apply to all students in the same way – for instance, the meritocratic principle (as formulated by Brighouse and Swift (2008, p. 447) on the basis of Rawls's principle of fair equality of opportunity) justifies inequalities due to (natural) talent and effort (Rawls, 1971): Educational prospects should thus be equal for those who are equally talented and show the same amount of effort.

Within the Rawlsian framework, however, it is unclear why we should leave it at that: Why accept inequalities based on natural talent? After all, these are also 'arbitrary from a moral point of view', to use Rawls's phrase. Why not accept strict equality of outcome for all students? In other words, if we start with some form of equality, it is not clear why we should not go 'all the way', as Tammy Ben-Shahar (2016) has suggested. This question seems particularly urgent when education is seen in terms of its 'positional' value – in the competition for social rewards, the value of someone's education depends on how well educated others are. This means that even small educational inequalities can be crucial in this respect.

This leads to a *fourth* point: Adequacy conceptions address this issue in that they 1) make no moral distinction between natural and social disadvantages, and 2) do not require a strict neutralisation of these disadvantages, but demand that they be mitigated to enable everyone to achieve a basic level of education.

However, there is an important objection to the adequacy view, namely that it allows for inequalities – due to social or economic differences – above the threshold, inequalities that become relevant in the competition for social positions. In particular, if the state restricts its investment to securing a basic level of education, wealthy parents are invited to improve their children's position in the competition for social rewards through private investment. It may also be justified to favour socially privileged students in a selective school system (as is the case in Germany or Switzerland) to the extent that basic education is guaranteed for all.

This means that the threshold conception needs to be supplemented in some way, with an additional principle to ensure fair conditions in the competition for social rewards. Addressing this problem, however, leads back to the problems just mentioned, namely that it is unclear how far we should go with equalising education. There is – as I have just suggested – a tendency towards strict equality.

My proposal is that we should address this problem by defining a second educational threshold, tailored to the specific conditions of particular school systems and socio-economic environments (Giesinger, 2017). We can start with the idea that, at a certain point in their school careers, students should have a range of valuable (educational and occupational) options from which they can freely choose. In order for these options to be effectively open to them, they need the knowledge and skills necessary to follow one of the available courses.

The school systems in German-speaking countries, for example, offer different 'academic' and 'vocational' options. The problem, however, is that early selection in these systems virtually predetermines individual career paths at a relatively early age – before young people are able to make up their own minds about which path they want to take. I suspect that most individuals are not in a position to make this kind of future-oriented decision in a meaningful way before the age of 14. This means that individuals at that age – perhaps after 8 or 9 years of schooling – should meet the requirements for the relevant courses available in the system. Rather than assigning students to different school types at an early stage, everyone should be 1) supported in reaching a threshold of basic education and 2) further supported in acquiring the skills and knowledge that will enable them to make an autonomous decision about their own future.

This view is close to what Krassimir is asking for, although – as we will see – the argument is different: Krassimir is not arguing that young people should have different options available to them at a certain point, but that they should be recognised in their *Bildsamkeit* (capacity for *Bildung* or perfectibility).

**3 The relational critique**
So let us turn to Krassimir's critique of adequacy conceptions, which, as I have said, I understand primarily as a critique of the distributive paradigm. I would like to begin by distinguishing three different versions of this critique.

According to the *first* – 'radical' – critique, the question of (educational) justice should be discussed exclusively in relational terms, without any reference to the problem of distribution.

The *second* approach argues that relational considerations should be seen as theoretically prior to distributive issues. In this view, then, justice is primarily about the right kind of relationships with others, and distributive issues must be addressed within the relational framework. This is the view that I attribute to Axel Honneth and also to Elizabeth Anderson (1999; 2007). Perhaps it is the view that Krassimir would endorse, but it is noticeable that he never directly discusses distributive issues – so he might also be ascribed the radical view.

The *third* approach is to see relational considerations as complementary to distributive theories of justice. While the issue of distributive justice has been prioritised under the influence of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971), turning to relational issues promises insights that are obscured within the distributive framework. Against this background, distributive accounts are not rejected, but criticised as incomplete. We might call this a 'pluralist' approach.

The radical view seems implausible from the outset because it does not allow us to address distributive inequalities: If we insist that only relational aspects matter, we have nothing to say about social, economic or educational inequalities: In Germany, for example, about a quarter of fifteen-year-olds lack basic reading skills. The educational prospects of students from families with a low socio-economic status are also significantly worse than those of privileged students.

Nevertheless, there may be ways of defending the radical view from a educational perspective – or, more specifically, from the perspective of a broadly Humboldtian conception of *Bildung* (as self-realisation) combined with recognition-theoretical considerations. Firstly, it could be argued that education is primarily about self-realisation or the enhancement of autonomy – not the acquisition of educational goods. It might also be argued that *Bildung*, although originally understood in individualistic terms, is essentially relational in the sense that self-realisation depends on being in the right kinds of relationships – on being loved, respected and valued by others, especially educators.

Krassimir (Stojanov, 2011, p. 37) puts forward a principle of 'egalitarian autonomy enhancement' ("*Prinzip der egalitären Autonomiestiftung*") as central to his account on educational justice. He explains that this principle is not ('primarily') concerned with the distribution of a certain 'quantity' of educational resources, but with the 'quality of educational relationships' ("*Qualität* schulischer Sozialbeziehungen"). This means, first and foremost, that students should be recognised in their potential to transcend the limitations of their social background through education ("… dass sein Potenzial erkannt wird, über die 'Vorgaben' seiner Herkunft durch Bildung hinauszuwachsen").

This can be interpreted in two ways: According to the first interpretation, there is a causal connection between the quality of relationships and the goals to be achieved: The recognition of students leads them to develop a proper self-relationship. Here we seem to be in consequentialist or at least 'teleological' territory: Recognition is a means of bringing about good consequences – enabling self-realisation.[1]

Looking at Krassmir's argument, another interpretation is possible – we could call it 'deontological', for lack of a better word: there is a moral demand to recognise (or respect) students in their potential (their *Bildsamkeit*) – regardless of possible consequences. In this sense, the injustice lies in the (educational) acts themselves – these acts 'constitute' an injustice.

Interestingly, Krassimir's main argument does not relate directly to the pedagogical domain – that is, educational practices and relationships, but to the education system. He argues that the selective school system in

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[1] Honneth (1997) acknowledges that his account – understood as a moral theory – contains a "teleological moment" (p. 28).

Germany violates this moral demand because some students – especially those from socially disadvantaged and migrant backgrounds – are disregarded in this system: Many of them do not get access to the most attractive school type, the *Gymnasium*.

It is also the case that the selective decision-making is in fact not merit-based: As empirical research shows, students with similar levels of achievement – who differ in their social background – might be allocated to different school types. Krassimir points to this fact in his more recent writings that include references to Fricker's account of epistemic injustice. He characterizes the misrepresentation of students' level of ability as a form of 'testimonial injustice'. We might indeed assume, that some students are underestimated in their ability or potential due to an 'identity prejudice' either related to their social background or their migrant status. Krassimir explains: "These are cases, in which less credibility is given to students of a lower social status, although they may have an equal ability to gain and produce knowledge as middle class students" (Stojanov 2020a, p. 69).

I would question whether these cases are about the 'credibility' of the students – the issue is not whether people believe what they say, but whether they are considered capable of pursuing certain school careers. Nevertheless, it makes sense to use Fricker's framework of epistemic injustice to discuss the moral problems of selection.

It should be noted that Krassimir's earlier critique of selection (Stojanov, 2011) is not focussed on these kinds of cases, but assumes that early selection is unjust even if it appropriately accounts for students' ability or talent (or at least, this is how I understand it).

I made an argument similar to Krassimir's in the first part when I suggested a second threshold: Students should have a range of options open to them at some point in their lives. I am not suggesting that the practice of early selection is *in itself* disrespectful: It is not inconceivable that a system in which some form of selection takes place will ultimately benefit all concerned. The problem is that this is not the case in the current system: Not only does it fail to provide a basic education for all (first threshold), it also unnecessarily denies some students valuable educational or career options (second threshold).

As I said, it is not clear to me whether Krassimir actually endorses the radical view. Let us turn to the **second kind of critique** of the

distributive paradigm – the claim that relational considerations should be seen as theoretically prior. One way of interpreting this view is to say that distributive (educational) inequalities matter, but only to the extent that they *express* a relational form of injustice – the question then becomes, for example, whether the fact that some people lack basic education is an expression of some kind of disrespect for them.

Another way of understanding the theoretical priority of relational justice is to assume that the aim of education is to enable individuals to participate in egalitarian relationships (relationships of mutual recognition). In this regard, Krassimir emphasises the importance of autonomy – he speaks of 'egalitarian autonomy enhancement'). In an interview conducted by Krassimir, Axel Honneth takes a slightly different view when he points out that the aims of education should focus on social skills:

> With regard to schooling this means to grasp of the educational goal as helping the child or pupil to develop a communicative attitude, a sense for the advantages of a cooperative mode of problemsolving over an individualistic style of dealing with cognitive or moral challenges. The best word for the kind of freedom children should become acquainted with at school would be 'social freedom', an individual freedom that I can gain only and exclusively together and in cooperation with others. (Stojanov, 2020b, p. 101)

This kind of social freedom, then, allows students to be free (or autonomous) while standing in relationships of recognition. It can be assumed that being free in this way presupposes certain skills, attitudes and forms of knowledge that are acquired in the educational process.

This is close to Elizabeth Anderson's claim that individuals should acquire the 'capabilities' to function as democratic equals (Anderson, 1999). While Anderson's account theoretically prioritises relational equality, she combines this view with a distributive conception of sufficient or adequate education. Notably, Krassimir refers to Anderson in developing his own account (Stojanov, 2011, p. 57), but without mentioning that she defends a threshold conception of educational justice – based on a relational understanding of equality.

The upshot of these considerations is that in giving priority to relational considerations we do not escape the debate about distributive educational

justice. It should also be noted that it is not possible to simply *derive* a distributive account from the notion of relational equality. There is a need to discuss, for example, whether basic education is sufficient to achieve relational equality, or whether more is required.

Given that distributive issues 1) cannot be avoided and 2) do not automatically resolve themselves within the relational framework, the third (**pluralist**) perspective becomes interesting: Instead of prioritising either the relational or the distributive approach, we can assume that both are independently relevant. There are forms of relational injustice in education – for example, humiliating students in class or underestimating students' potential because of prejudice – that are unjust regardless of their distributive consequences. Distributive inequalities may also be unjust in themselves. At the same time, relational and distributive injustices can be intertwined in many ways: Forms of disrespect can exacerbate distributive injustices, while these can further relational injustices.

## 4 Concluding remarks

While I feel most comfortable in the pluralist camp, I suspect that Krassimir does not want to join it. Having reviewed his arguments, however, I am not clear whether he supports the radical view (and how exactly he would articulate it). If he is attracted to the second view, I would assume that we would indeed come to an agreement: He would probably also conclude that we need (first and foremost) some kind of threshold view that ensures basic education for all. In my view, this is morally more important than abolishing early selection.

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