

Poverty, Partiality, and the Purchase of Expensive Education

Forthcoming in *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics*

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Abstract: Prioritarianism doesn't value equality as such—any reason to equalize is due to the benefits for the worse off. But some argue that prioritarianism and egalitarianism coincide in their implications for the distribution of education: equalizing educational opportunities improves the socioeconomic opportunities of the worse off. More specifically, a system that prohibits parents from making differential private educational expenditures would result in greater gains to the worse off than a system that permits these expenditures, all else equal. This paper argues that prioritarianism *opposes* a cap on educational expenditures. The argument, in brief, is that an equalized provision of schooling does a worse job of channeling the partiality of rich families in ways that produce positive spillover for poorer children. My challenge to the prioritarian case for educational equality is an internal one: the very concerns about parental partiality that underlie prioritarian objections to uncapped educational expenditures apply with even greater force to a system that caps educational expenditures.

Keywords: educational justice; educational equality; private education; positional goods; prioritarianism; egalitarianism

Even if we don't object to inequality in itself, we should object to inequalities that impoverish the poor. Educational inequality looks like one of these inequalities: being *relatively* badly educated worsens your job prospects (among other things) and your absolute welfare along with it. Accordingly, some philosophers suggest that the case for educational egalitarianism can be grounded in *prioritarianism*—the view that a benefit is more morally valuable the worse off the beneficiary.¹ We need only prioritize the poor to justify equalizing educational opportunities.

This paper argues that prioritarianism actually speaks *against* equalizing educational opportunities. More specifically, I contend that a system that permits parents to make differential private educational expenditures better satisfies a prioritarian criterion of justice than a system that does not, all else equal.

My case rests partly on what Geoffrey Brennan and James Buchanan call “behavioral symmetry”—when comparing different institutional structures we must hold our behavioral assumptions constant, absent a compelling reason to do otherwise.² We shouldn’t idealize in one instance but not the other. There’s little doubt that rich parents’ partiality toward their own children causes an uncapped system of education provision to function suboptimally from a prioritarian perspective. Without spending caps, these parents can buy their children elite schooling that disadvantages poorer students in labor market competitions. But I argue that an equalized provision of schooling falls even *shorter* of the optimum when we apply the same assumptions about parental motivations and resources. The argument, in brief, is that an equalized provision of schooling does a worse job of channeling the partiality of rich families in ways that produce positive spillover for poorer families—particularly in terms of enriching the general supply of human capital and accelerating economic growth. My challenge to the prioritarian case for educational equality is thus an internal one. That is, the very concerns about parental partiality that underlie prioritarian objections to uncapped educational expenditures apply with even greater force to a system that caps educational expenditures. A like-to-like comparison reveals an unequalized provision of schooling to be the *least* flawed of nothing but flawed alternatives.

I begin by sketching the basic case for educational equality (§1). Then I take up the argument that restricting differential educational investment would incentivize rich parents to invest resources in publicly provided schools, thereby creating positive externalities for poorer children. I argue that, to the contrary, such restrictions would

merely incentivize rich parents to invest in private benefits that will continue to confer competitive advantages on their own children (§2).

Next I consider an argument alleging that ‘leveling down’ the education of the rich in itself benefits the poor. Leveling down the education of the rich improves the *relative* quality of the poor’s education and thus their competitive position in the labor market. I reply first by noting that equalizing the distribution of educational credentials effectively nullifies their value as a labor market signal and thus incentivizes competitions for other, unequally distributed credentials (§3). I then argue that these new competitions would be less conducive to the development of human capital and thus economic growth than the educational competition they replace—a result that would harm the labor market opportunities of the poor by worsening the general quantity and quality of jobs available over time (§4). Next, I contest the claim that leveling down education is justified due to the importance of the *relative* position of the poor in the distribution of income and jobs (§5). I close by emphasizing the need to make genuinely *ceteris paribus* comparisons of educational systems (§6).

§1 The Case for Educational Equality

This paper offers a defense of the parental liberty to differentially invest in children’s education. I don’t appeal to the intrinsic importance of parents’ liberty to make educational choices for their children. Although I can’t argue for it here, I think that whatever rights parents are entitled to exercise over their child’s education are usually trumped by consideration of that child’s (and other children’s) welfare. Instead, I make the case for permitting educational inequalities on prioritarian grounds. According to prioritarianism, a welfare gain is morally better the worse off the gainer.³ Thus,

prioritarian doesn't assign any intrinsic value to equality—what matters is preferentially benefiting the worse off, not minimizing the gap between the worse off and the better off.

With the distinction between prioritarianism and egalitarianism in mind, it's important to clarify precisely what claim I'm challenging—it's the claim that states ought to restrict differential expenditures on private schooling on the grounds that instituting such a restriction benefits poor students relative to a system without this restriction. Nothing in my argument speaks against robust government expenditures to directly enrich the educational opportunities of poor children. These transfers can be defended for the prioritarian reason that they alleviate absolute educational deprivation, independently of their effect on educational *disparities*.

The equalized provision of education is of course sometimes defended on egalitarian grounds. Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift appeal to the idea of fair competition to make the case for a principle of equal opportunity.⁴ A competition is unfair if some competitors start at a disadvantage through no fault of their own.⁵ It would be unfair to assign a runner to a starting gate behind his competitors in a race he has no choice but to run. Similarly, it's unfair for people to do worse in socially structured competitions for income, wealth, jobs, and status because they were born into unfavorable circumstances.

A child's educational background exerts a significant influence on her lifetime socioeconomic opportunities; thus, Brighouse and Swift argue that an equal distribution of education is fair in virtue of reducing inequalities in opportunities to succeed in competitions for income, wealth, jobs, and status. More specifically, "An individual's prospects for educational achievement may be a function of that individual's talent and effort but they should not be influenced by his or her social class background."⁶ By

analogy, it's fair for a runner to win the race in virtue of running the fastest but not in virtue of receiving an undeserved head start.⁷

But you needn't be an egalitarian generally to be an egalitarian about education specifically. Brighthouse and Swift, among others, argue that insofar as we prioritize the absolute welfare of the worse off, we have reason to equalize educational opportunities. *This* is the argument I focus on. One reason for doing so is that many egalitarians—Brighthouse and Swift included—think that if inequality reductions clash with poverty reductions, poverty reductions win.⁸ Indeed, Brighthouse and Swift argue that an educational system must prioritize benefits to the worse off above equality to be morally justified, all things considered.⁹ In what follows I'll explain—and contest—the prioritarian case for equalized educational expenditures.

It's worth pausing to note that it's not clear precisely to what extent we have reason to equalize education on Brighthouse and Swift's view. One possibility is an outright ban on unequal spending; another is a cap on unequal spending. Brighthouse and Swift seem most sympathetic to a ban on unequal educational spending.¹⁰ And since a spending ban looks to be the most promising route for bettering the opportunities of the disadvantaged, this is the policy I'll focus on.

§2 The Resource Drain

First up is what I'll call the *resource drain* argument for educational equality. Brighthouse and Swift suggest that permitting wealthy parents to buy expensive private education for their children would harm disadvantaged students attending public schools due to the loss of the wealthy parents' "lobbying power and support for the schools."¹¹ If wealthy parents can withdraw their children and their resources from public schools, then those

public schools will worsen. This outcome harms those who remain in public schools—namely, children whose parents cannot afford expensive private education.

Let's start by looking at the assumption that underlies Brighthouse and Swift's concern that wealthy parents will withdraw their children from public schools: these parents are partial to their own children and are primarily concerned to advance *their* interests. So what happens to the argument against permitting differential educational investment if we consistently assume this sort of parental partiality? In short, we shouldn't expect partial parents to redirect the time and resources they would have spent on their children's private education to their children's public schools. Instead, they'll invest in extracurricular activities that provide their children with private benefits. Restricting educational expenditures will simply *reroute* parents' desire to give their children advantages. It's a case of the substitution effect: if the price of Coke rises, I'll drink more Pepsi—my desire to drink cola is simply rerouted. If the price of advantaging their children via private schooling becomes higher or outright prohibitive, partial parents will buy *different* advantages.

Let me spell this argument out more carefully. There are two reasons to think that restrictions on private educational expenditures won't result in greater investment in public schools but rather a redirection of those expenditures toward different private goods. First, investment in public schools is, to some extent, a public good: *all* of the school's students reap a fraction of the benefits. Any one parent's contribution to public education reform has a negligible effect on the benefits to her own child. Thus insofar as a parent is partial to her own children, it's much less efficient to invest resources in public schools than private extracurricular benefits like tutoring, dance, and athletics—

activities whose benefits are fully internalized by her own children.

Note that this is an *internal* criticism: I'm simply following through on the implications of the parental partiality that motivates the case for restricting educational expenditures in the first place. On the assumption that parents care most about their own children, we shouldn't expect them to 'socialize' the benefits of their resources by channeling them into public schools. It's cheaper to simply buy privatized benefits for their children. By analogy, suppose the state prohibits citizens from spending unequal amounts on bottled water in an attempt to incentivize investment in the public water supply. Insofar as I am concerned with improving what *my* child drinks, the prohibition encourages me to buy her n dollars of apple juice rather than spend n dollars purifying the public water supply that everyone drinks.

Second, investing in public schools does nothing to improve one's child's chances *relative* to other children. To a large extent, Brighthouse and Swift are worried about parents who seek to give their own children advantages in competitions for jobs, income, and status. These parents have little incentive to spend their resources in ways that benefit their child's competitors as much as they benefit their own child. That kind of expenditure would be self-defeating. By analogy, if my goal is to ensure that my child runs faster than the other students, I have zero incentive to spend n dollars buying world-class shoes for the entire school. Rather, I'll spend n dollars on new shoes, gym memberships, and so on for my daughter in the hope of outspending her rivals.

Of course, even partial parents are motivated by considerations other than competitive advantages for their children. They might invest time and resources into improving their children's public schools simply because they want to enrich their children's educational

experience. (However, if this a parent's aim, it is far more efficient for her to invest in private, *extracurricular* educational experiences for her children—as noted above, her children receive the full benefit of private investments as opposed to the fraction of the benefit they receive from their parent's investments in their public schools.)¹² My point is that Brighthouse and Swift themselves regard the desire for competitive advantage as a significant parental motivator and that *insofar* as parents are partial in this way, they'll be unmotivated to funnel their resources into their children's public schools. In any case, as I explain in the next section, it only takes a modest increase in unequally distributed extracurricular advantages to undercut the prioritarian case for educational equality.

§3 The Credentialing Argument

Even if banning unequal educational expenditures won't increase the resources allocated to public schools, equalization may still benefit poorer students. Some educational egalitarians suggest that education is a positional good.¹³ This means that the value of an education is not determined by how much education you have in absolute terms, but rather how much you have relative to others.¹⁴ More specifically, Brighthouse and Swift argue that education is a positional good as a means to labor market opportunities.¹⁵ Brian Barry makes the same point: "In the job market, what matters is not how much education you have but how much you have in relation to others."¹⁶

Education has value beyond its positional aspect but the positional aspect is what grounds the argument to equalize educational expenditures. Decreasing the rich's education would improve the *relative* quality of the poor's education and, in turn, their competitive position in the labor market. Thus, reducing the amount of education the better off can purchase *in itself* improves the occupational opportunities of the worse

off.¹⁷ By analogy, reducing the amount of training my tennis opponent can purchase in itself improves my chances of winning the match. So, there is reason to prohibit differential investment in education even if the prohibition fails to improve the absolute quality or quantity of education of the poor. Brighthouse and Swift call this “leveling down” education.¹⁸

The notion that education is a positional good becomes clearer when we zero in on its credentialing function.¹⁹ Education’s competitive value can be understood in terms of its ability to signal the relative fitness of its possessor for a particular job. For instance, elite law firms take a degree from Yale Law School to signal an applicant’s fitness for their job opening.

The signaling power of a relatively poor education is greater when education is equalized. A degree from State U is a more favorable indicator of ability if it’s the highest educational attainment possible—that is, it’s a stronger signal if Yale shuts down. So it’s natural to conclude that we should equalize education to reduce disparities in signaling power that translate into diminished job opportunities for the poor.

Here’s the problem with the credentialing argument. The pursuit of accreditation by its very nature involves the pursuit of differentiation.²⁰ Employers have a limited number of openings at any given time; not everyone can get the job. So employers need to determine which candidate is *better* than all the rest. In this way, hiring decisions *must* be made on the basis of inequalities. Thus, if you equalize the distribution of one type of credential (e.g., education), then employers must turn their attention toward credentials that are *not* equalized. It is precisely because a credential’s value is its ability to signal an

inequality that equalizing any particular credential is unproductive. It merely incentivizes the pursuit of *other* credentials.

Critically, the signaling power that education loses thanks to equalization will be absorbed *entirely* by the remaining unequalized credentials. Take a stylized analogy. Suppose you're managing a decathlon team and you only know two things about the prospective team members: their time in the 40-yard dash and their vertical leap. You might be inclined to give equal weight to both metrics when deciding who should make the team. That is, 50% of your decision is based on sprinting scores and the other 50% is based on jumping scores. But as chance would have it, all the athletes had identical times in the 40-yard dash. Now 100% of your decision has to be based on vertical leap because that's the only way to differentiate between the competitors. The same analysis applies to schooling. Decreasing the credentialing value of schooling simply increases—to an identical extent—the value of other, unequally distributed credentials.²¹ Inequality isn't reduced; it's just redistributed. Blocking a credentialing competition is like plugging a single hole in a hole-ridden raft: you don't stop the leak—you just push the flow from one spot to another.

Now, maybe redistributing credentialing power is a good thing. If we eliminate elite private schooling as a differentiating credential, emphasis shifts to other credentials that poorer children might have a more equal opportunity to acquire—say, grades *within* school. This objection is strengthened by the possibility that disadvantaged students will benefit from the positive peer group effects generated when advantaged students attend their schools—a result that restrictions on private school spending may encourage.²²

Brighthouse and Swift write:

Children are resources for each other. Peers affect each other's aspirations and each

other's learning habits; and they learn from one another. Any given child has better prospects sharing a classroom with other children whose home life has acculturated them for the school environment, and who are well-behaved and motivated, than they do sharing one with other children who are not. Children of advantaged parents tend to possess these valuable characteristics more than children of the disadvantaged.²³

Let me first note that to reap the benefits of positive peer group effects, states may need to ban on private schooling as such—regardless of inequalities in spending—lest advantaged families choose to congregate precisely in order to capture the benefits of peer group effects.

In any case, there are two reasons to doubt that banning inequalities in spending will produce significant academic gains for disadvantaged students. First, there simply isn't much empirical support for the existence of substantial peer group effects on educational achievement. Restricting our focus to the last 15 years or so, a number of studies failed to find evidence of statistically significant effects.²⁴ What's more, "even those studies that find statistically significant effects, tend to find relatively small effects: student achievement rises by <10%, of 1 SD [standard deviation] for a 1 SD rise in peer group quality."²⁵ (Of course, there may well be substantial *non-academic* peer group effects worth pursuing but that's outside the purview of the current argument.)²⁶

But suppose we set aside the empirical question of the magnitude of positive peer group effects for a moment. Still, a second problem arises from Brighthouse and Swift's own assumptions about parental motivation. This problem relates to the prospects for socioeconomic integration resulting from bans on private school spending. Eliminating access to private schooling doesn't eliminate partial parents' desire to convert their wealth into advantages for their children—it simply redirects that desire toward other outlets. Although they cannot buy superior schooling directly, partial parents can still buy it indirectly, e.g., by buying expensive housing in higher-ranked school districts.

Brighthouse himself acknowledges the pervasiveness of district-based inequalities in school funding and quality.²⁷ Inequalities arise not only because of funding differences but also because advantaged students attract *other* advantaged students along with better teachers.²⁸ In sum, the partiality of wealthy parents produces socioeconomic segregation even with restrictions on private school spending.

To be clear: the preceding does not show that equalized school spending will yield *no* academic benefit for disadvantaged students due to positive peer group effects. But it does suggest that the benefits are likely to be more modest than proponents expect—which, in turn, lessens the likelihood that spending restrictions will prove to be a *net* benefit for disadvantaged students once its costs are tallied up.

On that note, let us examine some of the unintended costs of equalization. For instance, suppose spending restrictions do create a (perhaps modest) reduction in inequality of opportunity for grades. Grades, after all, would not be equalized as a result of school spending equalization. Indeed, as noted, grades would take on added importance as a differential credential if the quality of schooling itself could no longer serve as a differentiating credential. So if equalizing opportunities for grades to even a modest extent enabled disadvantaged students to gain ground on advantaged students, prioritarians should welcome the result.

The trouble with this argument is that wealthy and partial parents will have an added incentive to buy their children improved opportunities for grades precisely because grades will have taken on added importance as a differential credential. This point relates back to my earlier argument about the substitution effect. The redistribution of inequalities does nothing to weaken the advantages of rich parents; it simply reroutes

those advantages. Rich parents will still have the means to outcompete poorer parents for whatever credentials soak up the signaling power that's now up for grabs. Formal schooling is not the only means of boosting academic performance—supplementary education helps too.²⁹ Supplementary educational resources like SAT prep classes or academic tutoring help wealthy children win competitions for those academic credentials that are *not* equalized—e.g., grades, standardized test scores, awards, and so on.

James Tooley stresses that parents give their children educational opportunities outside of school and that equalizing schooling actually *increases* familial influence on educational opportunities:

The paradox is that the *more* you equalise *schooling*, the *more important* family influence will become. Take it to the limit: suppose we did manage to achieve a fully comprehensive state schooling system, all funded free at the point of delivery, as Brighthouse wants. There are no state schools that are any better than any others. This means that any and all educational variation between children will be because of their family influence . . . [I]f [hierarchically-inclined parents] know that schooling has been equalised, they will struggle to ensure that their children have access to as many *educational* opportunities outside of school as they can provide, in order to keep their children ahead of others in the struggle for positional goods. So equalisation of *schooling* will have made the educational advantages in this respect that families can confer *much more significant*. It will have done nothing to solve the problem of unequal *education*.³⁰

Indeed, Tooley probably undersells the problem. He focuses on parents who deliberately pursue extra educational advantages for their children. But to make matters worse, wealthy parents need not *intend* to advantage their children to create extracurricular inequalities that convert to inequalities in academic credentials.

Take the case of “summer school loss.” Low-income children retain less learning than middle-income children over the summer.³¹ Compounded over time, the gap becomes huge. For instance, children from low-income families are more than *two years* behind children from middle-income families in reading and verbal achievement by the end of fifth grade.³² The theory is that higher-income children are more likely to, among other

things, continue with educational activities when school is out of session.³³ Because of unequally distributed extracurricular advantages, equalizing formal schooling will do little, if anything, to equalize poor children's position relative to rich children in competitions for educational credentials.

Suppose, though, that the preceding is wrong and the equalization of formal schooling *would* result in the equalization of opportunities for educational credentials. Or, perhaps the educational egalitarian is willing to bite the bullet and prohibit differential expenditures on not only formal schooling but extracurricular educational goods such as private tutoring as well.³⁴ Still, the general problem of wealth-based inequalities in credentialing opportunities survives. The reason is because new competitions will arise for non-academic extracurricular goods like music, chess, sports, and so on.³⁵ If a credential's value is due to its unequal distribution, then we should expect partial parents to react to complete educational equalization by investing in unequally distributed private signaling goods. If you can't get your child into Yale by buying her elite private schooling, then buy her cello lessons instead.

Brighthouse and Swift recognize that equalizing educational spending may encourage extra-educational arms races.³⁶ As I'll explain below, I think they underestimate the force of this worry. But first let me explore a potential reply to my argument about the proliferation of credentialing competitions, educational or otherwise. Brighthouse and Swift can argue that investing in expensive signaling goods for your children like private schooling or cello lessons is an example of *illegitimate* parental partiality. Indeed, Brighthouse and Swift single out sending your daughter "to an expensive private school designed to optimize her chances in the competition for well-rewarded and interesting

jobs” as a paradigm case of illegitimate parental partiality.³⁷ It’s plausible that achieving a just distribution of opportunity requires not only institutional reform but also parents’ moral commitment to constraining their illegitimate partiality in their private choices.

I have two replies. First, this rejoinder creates a Catch-22: as illegitimate parental partiality decreases, so does the need for the state to forcibly equalize educational expenditures. If I *choose* not to send my daughter “to an expensive private school designed to optimize her chances in the competition for well-rewarded and interesting jobs,” then it’s unclear why the state would need to enforce restrictions on my educational expenditures.³⁸

Second, and more importantly, even legitimate forms of parental partiality will produce the same inequalities in extracurricular opportunities as illegitimate forms of partiality. It is both infeasible and undesirable to stop parents from conferring *any* extra-educational advantages on their children. Many educational egalitarians themselves acknowledge that prospects are dim for preventing differential extracurricular parental investment.³⁹ Swift argues that even something as trivial as reading one’s child a bedtime story can give her a competitive advantage relative to children whose parents do not read to them.⁴⁰ He says, “Those [children] who get stories will tend to have better lives than those who do not, partly because those who have had stories tend to be better placed in the competition for jobs and their attendant rewards.”⁴¹ And indeed, Brighthouse and Swift suggest that bedtime story reading can be a form of *legitimate* parental partiality and thus permissible under certain conditions.⁴² Reading *Goodnight Moon* to your son can be an instance of legitimate partiality because, among other things, it’s a critical part of enjoying the distinctive goods of a parent-child relationship.⁴³

Suppose, then, that the distribution of schooling is fully equalized but the distribution of bedtime stories is not. Roger and Morty are identical twins separated at birth. As chance would have it, they both receive identical schooling. Indeed, the only difference in their upbringing is that Morty was read bedtime stories as a child but Roger was not. All else equal, the bedtime stories will be the decisive factor in Morty's landing the job over Roger (maybe Morty got higher grades as a result of the stories). Remember, the leveling down argument itself presupposes that Morty's *relative* position in the distribution of credentials is what determines his job opportunities. The winning job candidate need not have absolutely good credentials or even be better than his competition by a wide margin; he just needs to be better. By analogy, a runner only needs to cross the finish line a second before her competitors to win the race.⁴⁴

In summary, educational equality is unlikely to reduce *net* inequalities in labor market opportunities. At most, it will reshuffle inequalities and create a new class of the least advantaged—namely, those who suffer extracurricular disadvantages. Of course, those children who suffer extracurricular disadvantages are likely to be the very same children that suffer from educational disadvantages due to poverty or parental disinterest, among other factors. Thus, we should not expect equalizing educational expenditures to improve the labor market opportunities of the less advantaged all things considered.

§4 Human Capital

At this point, it appears as though the debate over leveling down education is at a stalemate. Maybe I'm right that leveling down educational expenditures won't help the poor, but I haven't shown that it will *harm* them either. In this section, I go a step further

and argue that leveling down educational expenditures would actually worsen the socioeconomic opportunities of poorer children.

In the last section, I argued that closing off the competition in schooling credentials would only serve to encourage competitions for other credentials. So now our task is identifying the least objectionable competition from a prioritarian perspective. My argument in this section is that educational competition is *comparatively* benign. That is, educational competition is likely to do better by the poor than the competitions that would take its place.

The reason, in brief, is that educational competition is more conducive to the development of human capital—and thus to economic growth—than the non-educational competitions that would replace it. Greater economic growth, in turn, increases the general quantity and quality of employment opportunities, including those available to the poor. Parental investment in extracurricular pursuits like music and athletics will generally not cultivate the sort of human capital that accelerates economic growth. Or, to put the point comparatively, they are apt to do *less* to accelerate economic growth than investments in education.

Brighthouse and Swift themselves note two ways that that permitting differential educational investment can have a positive effect on economic growth that redounds to the benefit of the less advantaged. First, there's the incentive effect:

One argument for permitting elitist private education, and thereby allowing parents who can afford it to buy their children an unfairly good chance of getting a well-rewarded and interesting job, is that preventing their doing so may have damaging incentive effects – where 'damaging' means 'deleterious to the interests of the worse off'. Deprived of this means of investing in their children's well-being, they will have less interest in being productive, choose more leisure or consumption and less work, producing economic inefficiency and harming economic growth.⁴⁵

In brief, Brighthouse and Swift acknowledge that the opportunity to provide their children

with elite education is a powerful motivation for some parents to undertake labor rather than leisure, a result that's good for growth. It's probably a powerful motivation for them to save and invest, too.

Next, Brighthouse and Swift note that “it is likely also that some of what [wealthy parents] would choose to invest in their children is itself productive, not only in helping them achieve well-rewarded positions but in terms of helping to produce goods that accrue to the worse off.”⁴⁶ They elaborate on this point elsewhere:

Perhaps wealthy parents could be permitted to buy unfairly unequal educational opportunity for their children, say by paying for them to attend elite private schools or paying for expensive private tuition. As a result those children have a better chance of getting the college places, jobs, and status to which all are aspiring than do other (similarly talented and hardworking) children. But because parents can invest in their children, they do so, and thus the total stock of human capital in society is enhanced; the economy can then harness the productivity gains, due to enhanced human capital, to the benefit of the less advantaged.⁴⁷

Yet they doubt that the economic growth resulting from increases in educational expenditures will be significant enough to benefit the less advantaged more than equalizing the supply of education.⁴⁸

Before getting into the particulars of education and economic growth, I want to underscore a point about our intuitions concerning compounding growth in general. Psychologists and economists confirm the pervasiveness of *exponential growth bias*, viz. the “tendency to linearize exponential functions when assessing them intuitively.”⁴⁹ We are notoriously bad at estimating exponential growth. Here's an example:

I give you a large piece of paper, and I ask you to fold it over once, and then take that folded paper and fold it over again, and then again, and again, until you have refolded the original paper 50 times. How tall do you think the final stack is going to be? In answer to that question, most people will fold the sheet in their mind's eye, and guess that the pile would be as thick as a phone book or, if they're really courageous, they'll say that it would be as tall as a refrigerator. But the real answer is that the height of the stack would approximate the distance to the sun.⁵⁰

It would only take 50 folds to make something as thin as a piece of paper so tall as to reach the sun. This case shows us just how counterintuitive the power of exponential growth is.

Consider also a series of experiments showing that subjects systematically and dramatically underestimate the impact of compounding economic growth.⁵¹ For instance, when asked to answer the question, “What is the overall rise in national income within the next 25 years if the economy grows with an annual rate of 5%?,” over 92% of participants underestimated the answer.⁵² The mean estimated value was 82.76% but the correct value is 238.64%.⁵³

Here’s my point. Even if we think that a given policy will produce a small change on the growth rate, we shouldn’t thereby assume that the impact of this change will itself be small. Our intuitions about the economic (in)significance of changes in the growth rate are not trustworthy. We have to do some math.

So what economic losses can we expect from leveling down education? Both the quantity and quality of schooling affect the growth rate. One estimate suggests that each year of schooling increases economic growth by 0.58 percent.⁵⁴ Another puts the figure for secondary and higher levels of education at 0.44 percent.⁵⁵ The *quality* of schooling matters even more. For instance, economist Robert Barro finds that a one-standard-deviation increase in science scores raises the growth rate by a full percentage point per year.⁵⁶

The problem for our purposes is that, as far as I can tell, proponents of leveling down schooling haven’t yet produced a concrete proposal that details precisely how—and how far—to level down. (And in fairness, I don’t think they’re obligated to provide one at this

stage of philosophical debate.) Since we don't know exactly what leveling down would involve, we can't straightforwardly use the numbers above to estimate the resulting growth losses due to the drop in human capital development as well as parents' propensity to work and invest. The best I can do is make a sensible guess in light of the figures we *do* have that, at a minimum, should serve for illustrative purposes—say, a quarter of a percentage point. This estimate strikes me as modest and reasonable (although you can always recalculate the numbers for your preferred estimate if you disagree). So I think we can use this figure to at least start the conversation about the effect of leveling down education on growth.

Let's look at an example to illustrate the effects of a 0.25 percentage point drop in the growth rate. Suppose our growth rate declines from 3 percent to 2.75 percent. The effects would be significant even within a person's lifetime: it would cause nearly \$200,000 in losses (\$199,629 to be exact) over the 50-year career span of a worker whose initial salary was \$25,000.

The case for incentivizing educational rather than extracurricular investment is further strengthened when assessing *ongoing* institutional arrangements.⁵⁷ A theory of justice should value future generations.⁵⁸ John Rawls suggests a plausible way of arriving at an impartially justified institutional arrangement across generations. To specify a principle of just savings, he places choosers behind a veil of ignorance that prevents them from knowing their generation.⁵⁹ Rawls writes, “The correct principle is that which members of any generation (and so all generations) would adopt as the one their generation is to follow and as the principle they would want preceding generations to have followed (and later generations to follow), no matter how far back (or forward in time.)”⁶⁰ I believe that

this approach lends additional support to the prioritarian argument against leveling down education.

Let's compare the difference between a 3% and a 2.75% growth rate for the next generation. That is, consider the prospects of a person who is born today, begins working 18 years from now, and works for 50 years. Assuming an equivalent worker would earn \$25,000 starting today, the 0.25% difference in the growth rate will result in a lifetime income difference of over half a million dollars—\$543,803. Looking two generations (i.e., 36 years) ahead, that figure jumps to \$1,291,638. Three generations in the future, the difference in lifetime income is \$2,828,609. And so on. (Note: these figures assume that our worker receives no raises or promotions throughout the duration of her career.) Thus, a chooser who is ignorant of her own generation faces the possibility of nearly \$3 million in lifetime income losses if she selects the 'leveled down' arrangement. These figures are enough to furnish *prima facie* reason to believe that an ongoing comparison favors prioritizing economic growth. They at least shift the burden of justification to those who contend leveling down education will bring comparable benefits over time.

Now, it's important to emphasize that these numbers are simply meant to be suggestive. Without a precise proposal detailing what specifically leveling down education would involve, we can't make precise predictions of the costs of leveling down. That said, I do think these numbers indicate that we should at least take seriously the possibility that the growth losses due to leveling down education will be significant. At this stage of debate, there is a reasonable prioritarian case to be made against leveling down.

So far I've considered the worry that leveling down education will have an insignificant impact on economic growth. But we might still worry that the growth won't benefit the poor. Brighthouse and Swift note that "the putative increased production yielded by, for example, the unfairly superior education of the privileged in elite private schools will only improve the prospects for the flourishing of the less advantaged if some of the product finds its way into their hands (because the tax-benefit system or the design of the economy facilitate this)."⁶¹

The fruits of growth can benefit the worse off in both of the ways suggested by Brighthouse and Swift. First, economic growth improves general job prospects by increasing the total number of jobs available as well as the *real* wages paid by available jobs. This result is not due to a "trickle down" effect; rather, investments in capital (including human capital) drive productivity gains that decrease the cost of goods available for consumption.⁶² The result is an increase in the real purchasing power of wages, including the wages of the poor.

Suppose, for illustration's sake, a well-educated student invents a marginally cheaper microwave door design. The price of microwaves drops by 5¢—meaning that everyone's real wages stretch 5¢ further. 5¢ isn't much (it's literally pocket change) but it adds up quickly when iterated. For instance, in 1984, only 12.5% of households below the poverty line owned microwaves.⁶³ In 2011, 93.4% did.⁶⁴ Maybe microwaves are a trivial case. Still, a similar pattern holds for plenty of other goods, from food to cars to housing.⁶⁵

Perhaps, though, you're unconvinced and remain skeptical that growth itself does much for the poor.⁶⁶ Even so, states can simply tax the gains in economic output for

redistributive purposes.⁶⁷ The tax revenue can be directly transferred to the poor (as in a basic income guarantee), allocated to schools, or used to expand public sector employment. All of these options suggest ways in which gains from growth can be channeled to the socioeconomic benefit of the poor.

Even if we remain unimpressed by the social benefits of economic growth, we should be *less* impressed by the social benefits of educational equalization. I've argued that educational equalization will simply proliferate extra-educational outlets for parental partiality and thus do little, if anything, to lessen the advantages of wealthier families. The question, then, is not whether the social benefits of marginal increases in education are high in some absolute sense but whether they are likely higher than the feasible alternatives. My argument is that growth is the lesser of two evils: equalization is apt to bring little to no social benefit whereas growth will bring *some* benefit.⁶⁸ Channeling parental partiality into the cultivation of children's human capital via education is socially beneficial compared to the alternative of channeling parental partiality toward competitions for extracurricular advantages like lacrosse or piano lessons.⁶⁹

§5 How Much Does Relative Position Matter?

One might object that even if growth improves the overall socioeconomic opportunities of the poor, they remain at a disadvantage for those specific jobs over which they are competing with richer, better educated candidates. Leveling down education, then, can be justified as a way of improving the poor's prospects for *particular* jobs. Swift notes, "It remains true that you cannot improve somebody's chance of achieving a particular desired outcome for which they are both competing without damaging somebody else's."⁷⁰ It is clear that you cannot improve somebody's chance of acquiring a particular

desired job for which they are competing without damaging somebody else's. But it is less clear that this claim implies support for education equalization.

First, most theories of fair opportunity (be they egalitarian, prioritarian, or something else) do not assert that people must have a fair opportunity to win *every* particular job or good for which they compete. Rather, they require a fair opportunity for something more general, such as long-term welfare, income, or capabilities.

Second, and more importantly, Swift's argument overgeneralizes. Remember, Swift places education in a special class of goods—positional goods—whose value is determined by their possessor's relative standing in the distribution. If my competitor's education is better than mine, I'm at a labor market disadvantage. So, according to Brighthouse and Swift's argument, we have reason to level down my competitor's education to raise the *relative* equality of my education and thus erase my disadvantage.

Here's the problem: the means of "achieving a particular desired outcome" in a competition are positional goods regardless of the particular desired outcome in question.⁷¹ There is nothing special about education as a means to jobs. If I'm walking in an orchard with a friend and we both want to pick *that* orange, my chances of achieving my "particular desired outcome" worsen as my friend's chances improve. If his reach is quicker than mine, I'm less likely to snatch the orange. To paraphrase Brian Barry's remarks about education: what matters is not how quick my reach is in absolute terms, but how quick my reach is relative to others.

However, the acquisition of tasty oranges needn't be a zero-sum game, at least across time. Why? Because we can make more oranges. We can also make more jobs. By contrast, the acquisition of a status symbol like an original Picasso *is* a zero-sum game:

there is no way to produce more goods of this type over time (at least at this point). It is fixed sum by its very nature. So, my possession of an original Picasso lessens everyone else's chance of possessing one. But jobs are more like oranges than Picassos.

It is true that we cannot produce more *top* jobs, when 'top job' is cashed out in relative terms—having a better job than your peers. Only ten people can be among the ten highest paid employees in the firm. And Brighthouse and Swift point out that in some ways “relative position is more important than absolute wealth in determining one's prospects for flourishing.”⁷² They discuss two main ways in which having a relatively better job can be more important for well-being than having an absolutely good job. First, a number of epidemiologists suggest that material and occupational inequalities are bad for the health of the worse off.⁷³ Second, Brighthouse and Swift cite evidence indicating that relative income has a more significant impact on people's subjective well being than absolute income and that there is a satiation point beyond which greater absolute income ceases to yield greater happiness.⁷⁴

Whether or not the preceding claims are correct is an empirical question, so we can't expect to resolve it at the level of philosophy. Here I'll just mention that the claims are contested and discuss some of the relevant counterevidence. First, the claim that material or occupational inequality in itself worsens the health of the worse off is disputed.⁷⁵ Some suggest that the relevant health risk is an absolute lack of occupational autonomy, responsibility, and opportunity for creativity.⁷⁶ Job rank and income tends to be correlated with control over one's occupational responsibilities and opportunities for stimulating work. The solution, then, seems to be the production of more jobs that increase occupational autonomy and decrease occupational monotony and stress.

Brighthouse and Swift themselves even suggest “reforming the structure of occupations so that there are higher levels of control at the lower end of the job ladder” as an alternative to equalization.⁷⁷

Second, the research that Brighthouse and Swift cite about the comparative importance of relative income has been challenged by more recent and comprehensive analyses of cross-country data. Research using a broader array of countries found that average levels of subjective well-being do increase with increasing absolute income—with no evidence of a satiation point.⁷⁸ Furthermore, comparisons of people within and between countries failed to show the previously asserted link between subjective well-being and relative income.⁷⁹ The authors summarize that their “findings both put to rest the earlier claim that economic development does not raise subjective well-being and undermine the possible role played by relative income comparisons.”⁸⁰ Since there is conflicting evidence about the psychological importance of relative income comparisons, we cannot reach a definitive conclusion here. My aim is simply to show that concerns about relative income do not ground a decisive case for educational equalization.

§6 The Lesser Evil

In closing, it’s worth emphasizing that real-world parents are not a homogeneous group. They aren’t universally partial or impartial. The key point, though, is that we must consistently apply our assumptions: if we criticize an unequalized distribution of education on the grounds that it can be corrupted by parental partiality, we must follow through on the implications of parental partiality for an equalized distribution as well. So we ought to compare symmetrically conditioned institutions. Should prioritarians prefer an equalized or unequalized arrangement *all else equal*?

I have argued against the equalization of educational expenditures. A system of education that permits parents to differentially invest in their children's schooling will tend to do a better job of channeling parental partiality in ways that benefit the worse off. Inequality is not perfect, but it may be the least imperfect of our imperfect options.

Of course, all else might not be equal in the real world—parental motivation may well be inconsistent. So we should withhold final judgment until we possess empirical evidence concerning, e.g., how wealthy parents' spending patterns would change in response to "complete leveling down." However, as things stand, I've made an argument that countervails that of educational egalitarians using the very motivational assumptions that they themselves rely upon. At a minimum, I have shifted the burden back to educational egalitarians to produce a non-ad hoc reason for departing from their own motivational assumptions.⁸¹

¹ The most explicit formulation of this argument is found in Brighouse and Swift, 2006. However, similar considerations are offered in, e.g., Hollis, 1982; Barry, 2005; Koski and Reich, 2006; Brighouse and Swift, 2008.

² Brennan and Buchanan, 2000, chapter 4.

³ On prioritarianism, see Parfit, 2002; Arneson, 2000; Crisp, 2003; Temkin, 2003.

⁴ Brighouse and Swift 2008.

⁵ Ibid., 446ff. See also Swift 2003.

⁶ 2008, 447. Brighouse (2010, 29) also mentions, but does not primarily focus on, a more radical conception of equality according to which "an individual's prospects for educational achievement should be a function neither of that individual's level of natural talent or social class background but only of the effort she applies to education."

⁷ Note, however, that Brighouse and Swift's conception of educational equality does not imply an equal distribution of educational resources. Rather, it requires greater spending on those students disadvantaged to a greater extent by their social class backgrounds. 2008, 448.

⁸ This point is made in Brighouse and Swift, 2006. Other prominent egalitarians who prioritize poverty reduction over inequality reduction include G.A. Cohen and Larry Temkin. See Cohen 2008 and Temkin 1993.

⁹ Brighouse and Swift 2008. They note, however, that a residual injustice may nevertheless remain if improving the position of the least advantaged comes at the cost of equality.

¹⁰ 2006, 477. It is important to emphasize that Brighouse and Swift are not advocating the complete leveling down of educational opportunity *all things considered*. Our reason to promote other values may defeat our reason to equalize educational opportunity.

¹¹ 2008, 452.

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- ¹² It might be objected that to fully realize an equalized provision of education, spending on even extracurricular educational goods would need to be capped. I discuss this possibility in section 3.
- ¹³ Parts of this section and the next borrow from and expand upon Freiman 2014.
- ¹⁴ Brighouse and Swift 2006, 478. See also Hollis, 1982; Koski and Reich, 2006.
- ¹⁵ Brighouse and Swift 2006.
- ¹⁶ Barry, 2005, 176.
- ¹⁷ Brighouse and Swift, 2006, 478.
- ¹⁸ Brighouse and Swift, 2006. It's important to emphasize that leveling down education does not amount to leveling down *welfare*. Indeed, the aim of leveling down education is precisely to increase the welfare of the poor.
- ¹⁹ See, for instance, Hollis, 1982; Koski and Reich, 2006.
- ²⁰ I am grateful to John Thrasher for valuable discussions on this idea and for stressing that equalizing credentials nullifies them.
- ²¹ Cf. Tooley 2003, 438-9.
- ²² Thanks are due to two anonymous referees for pressing this objection.
- ²³ 2009a, 122. This worry is also raised in Barry 1998, 13.
- ²⁴ See, e.g., Angrist and Lang 2004; Sanbonmatsu et al. 2006; Cullen, Jacob, and Levitt 2006.
- ²⁵ Gibbons and Telhaj 2015, 6.
- ²⁶ See, e.g., Anderson 2007 and Satz 2007.
- ²⁷ 2010, 19.
- ²⁸ On the latter point, see *ibid*.
- ²⁹ For a nice discussion of this distinction see Halliday 2016, 162.
- ³⁰ 2003, 439, italics in the original.
- ³¹ Cooper et al, 1996.
- ³² Alexander and Entwisle, 1992 and 1994.
- ³³ Entwisle et al, 1997 and 2001.
- ³⁴ Brighouse and Swift (2009b, 69) suggest that something along these lines might be permissible in principle if not practice.
- ³⁵ Tooley (2003, 439) makes a similar suggestion. However, as far as I can tell, he is worried about the conversion of these sorts of extracurricular advantages into academic advantages. My concern is that these extracurricular advantages function as credentialing opportunities in themselves.
- ³⁶ 2008, 445.
- ³⁷ Brighouse and Swift 2009, 58.
- ³⁸ One might also object that parents who seek these kinds of educational advantages for their own children are not illegitimately partial—they want an equal distribution of opportunity and schooling—but they are uncertain of other parents' motives and thus need assurance that other parents will not defect from an egalitarian arrangement. A politically enforced solution, such as the prohibition of differential private schooling expenditure, solves this Prisoner's Dilemma. I believe this argument fails. The very uncertainty about other parents' motives that made the prohibition necessary will simply create a new Prisoner's Dilemma once the prohibition is in place. If I am unsure whether other parents are conferring *extracurricular* advantages on their children, I have an incentive to confer extracurricular advantages on my own children—if only to maintain equality between my children and others.
- ³⁹ Walzer 1983, 213; Swift, 2004, 13; Brighouse 2000, 120.
- ⁴⁰ Swift 2004, 13
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*.
- ⁴² 2009b, 57. They note (2009b, 69), however, that bedtime stories could be banned in principle under certain conditions: "If it turned out that bedtime stories could be substituted by other, less equality-disrupting activities, and that banning them would result in no loss to the distinctive

values that parents and children are able to derive from their relationship, then our account would have no grounds for objecting to their prevention.”

⁴³ Here it is worth reiterating that nothing in my argument speaks against “leveling up”—for instance, funding programs designed to assist disadvantaged families provide their children with supplementary educational resources.

⁴⁴ The idea that ordinal rank is what matters for college admissions and job market competitions speaks to a disadvantage of a spending cap as opposed to an outright spending ban. Even if a cap would shrink inequality, it would still permit wealthy parents to boost their children’s relative position in the distribution of credentials.

⁴⁵ 2006, 485.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ 2008, 449.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 451.

⁴⁹ Stango and Zinman 2009, 2807.

⁵⁰ Gladwell 2002, 11.

⁵¹ Christandl and Fetchenhauer, 2009.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 384.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Hanushek and Wößmann, 2007, 4.

⁵⁵ Barro 2013, 294 and 294, fn. 12. Barro notes that these cross-country results do not seem to hold for female students, a result he suggests can be attributed to discriminatory labor market practices (295).

⁵⁶ Barro 2013, 297.

⁵⁷ I am grateful to David Estlund for suggesting this line of argument.

⁵⁸ For example, if our time horizon for public policymaking ended with the current generation, then our (anthropocentric) reason to combat (e.g.) climate change, resource overconsumption, and careless radioactive waste disposal would be weaker than generally assumed because future generations will suffer the most severe costs of these problems.

⁵⁹ Swift (2004, 13-14) himself seems sympathetic to this general approach to justification. He proposes that we ask ourselves which rules we would endorse if we were ignorant of their effects on us.

⁶⁰ Rawls 2005, 274.

⁶¹ 2008, 453.

⁶² See, e.g., Horwitz 2015.

⁶³ United States Census Bureau Data reported in Cox and Alm 1995, 22.

⁶⁴ United States Census Bureau, 2011.

⁶⁵ More specifically, we see a decline in the work-time cost of these goods—viz. the amount of time someone earning an average wage must work to purchase these goods. See Cox and Alm, 1997. For a more recent survey of a range of goods, see Horwitz 2015.

⁶⁶ For instance, some economists have recently argued that gains in average household income in the United States over the last 30 years are due to large gains that have been unequally distributed to those at the top end of the wage distribution. See, e.g., Congressional Budget Office, 2011. However, a competing analysis that adjusts for changes in labor market participation and household types during that period indicates that median household income for most household types increased by roughly 44 percent to 62 percent from 1976 to 2006. See Fitzgerald 2008. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous footnote, the time cost of popular consumption goods has fallen dramatically in that time frame as well. See Horwitz 2015. In any case, from the perspective of prioritarianism, what matters is not how well the poor fare relative to the rich but rather how well the poor fare under one economic arrangement relative to how well they would fare under alternative arrangements. There is room for reasonable disagreement here but as I said

above, even if you doubt that growth significantly benefits the poor, we can implement various political measures to progressively redistribute the fruits of growth.

⁶⁷ The wealthy may well resist such taxes. However, feasibility worries cut both ways: the wealthy are also likely resist restrictions on their ability to send their children to the schools of their choice (and thus improve their lifetime economic prospects).

⁶⁸ So, for instance, even if education turns out to be largely a signaling good, it may nevertheless do more for human capital than its substitutes. On the idea that “the ‘signaling component’ of the return to education is probably only a small part of the percentage difference in wages associated with education,” see Altonji and Pierret 1996, 25.

⁶⁹ Hanushek and Wößmann (2007) argue that we see education increase economic growth at all levels of education because each level serves a purpose, e.g., cultivating literacy at the initial levels and producing new knowledge at later levels. These mechanisms via which education enriches human capital are inapplicable to most of the non-academic extracurricular activities in question.

⁷⁰ 2004, 16.

⁷¹ For a related discussion, see Freiman 2014.

⁷² 2008, 453.

⁷³ See, for instance, Wilkinson 1996; Marmot 2004.

⁷⁴ 2008, 453. They cite Frank 2000 and Layard 2005.

⁷⁵ See Pearce and Smith 2003; Mellor and Milyo 2002.

⁷⁶ Syme and Balfour 1998, 798. Brighouse and Swift (2006, 489) note this as well.

⁷⁷ 2006, 489.

⁷⁸ Stevenson and Wolfers 2008, 1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 3

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ For helpful comments on this paper, I am grateful to audiences at Virginia Commonwealth University and the University of Richmond as well as Jessica Flanigan, Javier Hidalgo, David Lefkowitz, Chris Tucker, and two anonymous referees for this journal. Earlier versions of this argument benefited from useful feedback from Harry Brighouse, David Estlund, and an audience at the University of Arizona.

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