

Postsecondary ~~Schooling~~ Education for All

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Let me begin by asking you a question I have often posed to my students: Which of the following public policies would you endorse?

1. Providing every eighteen year old in your state with a voucher worth \$20,000 that earns interest, is pegged to inflation, and could be used for additional education at any point during her or her lifetime.
2. Giving the top 30% of high school academic achievers \$40,000 to defray their costs at four-year colleges while the remaining 70% get \$15,000 to defray their costs at two-year colleges.

My students always prefer the first option and are uneasy when I tell them that they are beneficiaries of the second. I concur. Indeed, I hope to persuade you that the endorsement is implied by our shared commitment to political liberalism. I will begin by laying out a simple argument, then elaborate on its premises and, finally, rebut challenges to it.

THE BASIC ARGUMENT

1. The liberal democratic state ought (to the extent possible) to provide conditions for its citizens to flourish.
2. In order to flourish, individuals need opportunities to learn beyond those provided during the period of compulsory schooling and over the entire lifespan.

Conclusion 1. The state ought (to the extent possible) to allocate resources providing opportunities to learn beyond those provided during the period of compulsory schooling over the entire lifespan.

3. The state ought to manifest equal regard for every citizen.

Conclusion 2. In allocating resources for learning over the lifespan (beyond those provided during the period of compulsory schooling), the state ought to manifest equal regard for every citizen.

The first policy, while not logically implied by the argument, is clearly more consonant with it. Let me now say a bit more about the first two premises, simply assuming that the third is axiomatic for liberal democrats.

What do I mean by flourishing? The concept is a normative one, implying more than simple acceptance of what life has to offer, more than experiencing the pleasures of food, drink, sex, friendship, and the like, though these are not to be derogated. A flourishing life involves developing our talents and deriving satisfaction from their exercise. The idea is as old as Aristotle but as new as the most recent work of scientific psychologists, who, indeed, build on Aristotle's insights. Psychologist Martin Seligman, a leader in the study of "positive psychology," identifies three components to what he calls a "full" life.

The pleasant life...is wrapped up in the successful pursuit of the positive feelings, supplemented by the skills of amplifying these emotions. The good life, in contrast, is not about maximizing positive emotion, but is a life wrapped in successfully using your signature strengths to obtain abundant and authentic gratification. The meaningful life has one additional feature: using your signature strengths in the service of something larger than you are. To live all three lives is to lead a *full* life.¹

Premise two might sound like either a truism or a response to manpower needs in a changing economy, but I am getting at something more fundamental to liberalism itself. Philosophers make a point of claiming that citizens must be capable of “revising their conception of the good” or words to that effect. Philosophers of education who discuss the idea focus almost exclusively on the external and internal conditions needed for such revisions to be possible. They point, for example, to the need for the state to facilitate if not promote the development of autonomy. There is nothing wrong with this focus, but it is not sufficient.² These theorists entirely ignore the resources that might be needed to put those “revisions” into effect. All but the staunchest libertarians are aware that exercising options requires more than formal freedom and the lack of discrimination. But a parallel point holds for those who wish to “revise” or amend the choices made by or for them prior to the end of mandatory education. If an adolescent or adult has the desire to plot a new path or try a new activity, without the resources to effect that choice, he or she will be no less thwarted than if he or she lacked the autonomy to contemplate them as serious possibilities for him or her.

Beyond this, there are three specific reasons I emphasize the provision of opportunities to reject old paths and forge new ones. First, each of us is born into a parochial world; each internalizes its particular inducements and disincentives. Compare, for example, the child who grows up on a military base with one who grows up in an ashram.³ If we are lucky, there is a good fit between our inclinations and talents and what our world has to offer; if we are unlucky, there may not be, although it may take some time to find that out. If children have rather blindly followed the path their parents or community have put them on, we cannot hold them responsible for that since the ability to stand back and reflect on one’s path comes only in adolescence, if then. A child groomed to be a marine may wish to become a therapist; a child groomed to be a therapist may want to become a jazz musician instead.

Second, scientific research on happiness has pinpointed the limitations on our ability to judge what will prove satisfying. We are prey to illusions of various sorts that subvert our ability to make choices we subsequently endorse. Here is an example from psychologist David Gilbert.

Studies show that about nine out of ten people expect to feel more regret when they foolishly switch stocks, because most people think they will regret foolish actions more than foolish inactions. But studies also show that nine of ten people are wrong. Indeed, in the long run, people of every age and in every walk of life seem to regret *not* having done a thing much more than they regret things they *did*, which is why the most popular regrets include not going to college, not grasping profitable business opportunities, and not spending enough time with family and friends.⁴

Third, even if our regrets are few, even if we are fortunate with the major choices we made when young, we may still feel that all our talents are not utilized in our jobs; moreover, whether we are thirty-five or sixty-five, our own personal developments or new life circumstances may kindle desires to expand in new directions, especially as many of us will live longer than our parents and grandparents did.

Premise two and its implications are easy to misinterpret, and especially easy for you who are highly schooled to misinterpret. You are likely to think that when I talk about opportunities to learn, I am talking about books and schools, but books and schools may or may not be an integral part of the learning experiences I am referring to. Let me illustrate: You might derive intense satisfaction from being able to build a wooden boat, play a flute, engage in Zen meditation, play bridge, design a computer graphic, cook Thai food, speak Portuguese, collect Inuit art, take care of an ageing relative in her home, perform a Turkish folk dance, scale a cliff, box, or fly an airplane. All of these activities require learning over a period of time. Such learning will involve tutorials if not classes of some kind, to be sure, but few are taught in conventional schools and colleges, and most will involve reading only peripherally, if at all.

Moreover, and this is the key to the kinds of activities I have in mind, when engaged in by those who are beyond the beginner stages, they share a quality that is essential to a flourishing life. I refer here to what the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls optimal or “flow” experience, in which “Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears and the sense of time becomes distorted”⁵ Why should this be? Csikszentmihalyi elaborates:

What makes these activities conducive to flow is that they were *designed* to make optimal experience easier to achieve. They have rules that require the learning of skills, they set up goals, they provide feedback, they make control possible. They facilitate concentration and involvement by making the activity as distinct as possible from the so-called “paramount reality” of everyday existence.⁶

CHALLENGES AND REBUTTALS

A critic may accuse me of endorsing paternalism, contending that the state’s responsibility for education ends whenever compulsory education ends.⁷ Note that my proposal does not *require* that anyone beyond that age exercise his or her option to engage in further learning. Nonetheless, the critic is right that my proposal is paternalistic and perfectionistic in that it prevents the funds from being used to make a down payment on a home or buy a new plasma television set. The critic may argue that whatever instruction an educational voucher could purchase ought to compete in the market with every other kind of investment or consumer purchase a citizen may wish to make. The state should not put its thumb on the scale, so to speak. How, if at all, can this soft paternalism be justified?

One way of justifying it is by reminding the critic that the state already is engaged in this kind of paternalism and perfectionism. Consider, for example, the state’s protection of marriage, of which Stephen Macedo writes,

Conservatives are right to remind us that public policy plays a legitimate role — even in a liberal regime — in favoring better over worse ways of life and promoting a healthy moral culture. Offering certain advantages to those who settle down and enter into bonds of matrimony is one way of promoting more stable relationships and happier, healthier lives.⁸

Moreover, it can be argued that the state in privileging education over consumer goods is not so much overriding the market as compensating for its limitations. Consider the market for leisure and the ads for leisure-time activities found on television and mass print media. Activities such as playing golf, driving automobiles, working out in fitness clubs, and drinking beer are easy to find, but one rarely sees ads for engaging in most of the activities on the previous list. Why not? In some cases, such as building wooden boats, there are not enough people likely to be interested in them; in others, such as meditation, no special equipment is necessary to engage in them. In still others, the investment in time may be substantial before the rewards are experienced. It may be that some of these simply have not yet found savvy entrepreneurs to promote them. In any case, my point is that the commercial mass market does not publicize a full range of choices, and the liberal state need not feel squeamish about trying to compensate for the market's way of skewing leisure time activities. Finally, my proposal is actually more supportive of liberal neutrality than the status quo in that it does not privilege traditional learning. Indeed, my proposal requires that individual adult citizens have the widest range of choices possible, from private lessons in Zen meditation, to classes in accounting sought solely for purposes of job advancement.

WHO BENEFITS FROM EXPANDING COLLEGE EDUCATION?

Probably the primary objections to my proposal are likely to come from those who accept the argument but deny that it points clearly to the first policy rather than to present practice. Why might one think that the state is legitimate in investing more in the academically accomplished? I can think of four reasons:

1. One might think that the academically able have, through their accomplishments, *earned* the right to have more invested in them.
2. One might think that although dessert does not enter into it, it is nonetheless unreasonable if not actually unjust to invest equally in the educable and the uneducable, mandating, in effect, a redistribution of resources from those who can use them profitably to those who cannot.
3. Or, one might concede that the academically able have no more *right* to a subsidized education than anyone else but that everyone, including the less academically able, will profit from an investment in the latter's postsecondary education.
4. Finally, one might not share the egalitarian's concern for the least advantaged and adopt a utilitarian perspective, arguing that a disproportionate investment in the academically more accomplished contributes to the flourishing of a larger number of citizens even though the least advantaged may not be among them.

Let us examine these objections in order.

Do those who have compiled superior academic records in secondary school *deserve* a disproportionately greater public investment in their subsequent education? How could we tell? One way would be to apply a principle claiming that individuals deserve the rewards of whatever level of success they are responsible for.⁹ The idea here would be to control for those advantages deriving from factors beyond their own effort and choices. If we factor out all the advantages that derive from being born and reared in a more advantaged social milieu — everything from better maternal prenatal care to schools with better teachers and facilities, it is not clear how much academic success an individual can claim responsibility for. This is not to gainsay that most academically successful high school students exert considerable effort, but then that effort may be predicated on the rewards they can anticipate, rewards that students from poor families cannot. If, in addition, we discount whatever level of innate talent a student has, based as it is on one's success in what John Rawls calls the "natural lottery," it is far from clear that we can say that the successful student deserves a disproportionately greater investment in his or her continuing education.

The second argument claims that additional resources for postsecondary learning should follow educability as revealed by success during the first twelve years of school. This appears to be a very plausible stance, but as I have already suggested, it is based on a conflation of postsecondary learning with college or university enrollment. This all too easy conflation presupposes that postsecondary education will build upon and be just like secondary education, a matter of lectures and labs, laptops and libraries. But as we have already seen postsecondary learning may not resemble this stereotyped picture at all. Why does this matter? It matters because it transforms our picture of educability. While it is true that the mediocre secondary school student may be at a relative disadvantage in the college classroom compared to her more academically-accomplished peer, there is no reason to think she would carry that disadvantage into the boxing ring, the boatyard, or the Zendo, should she wish to learn boxing, boatbuilding, or meditation. One might even contemplate the opposite hypothesis: that the student who flourishes in the library might languish in one of these other educational settings.

The third challenge is based on the idea that the whole society, *including the least advantaged*, benefit from a disproportional educational investment in the academically able. The idea derives from Rawls's theory of justice, but we must be careful in specifying the nature of the advantage. Two formulations might apply. On the one that Rawls himself adopts, the least advantaged would *not* be willing to trade fewer educational opportunities for greater welfare. In the most complete articulation of his principles in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls asserts: "An inequality of opportunity must enhance the opportunities of those with the lesser opportunity."¹⁰ I can find no mechanism by which the first policy would *reduce* the opportunities of the least advantaged below their current level. But suppose we alter Rawls's principle in a way that permits unequal opportunities for continuing learning if this is more likely to provide conditions for everyone to flourish. This possibility is not utopian; it has been realized in the classic Israeli socialist kibbutzim where the

community selected for university study those whom they believed would make the greatest contribution to the collective welfare. Of course in that setting, all shared equally in whatever contribution to enhanced productivity the university graduate was able to provide.

But even in individualist, capitalist society investment in the academically able might be thought to enhance everyone's welfare, and a mechanism to achieve the effect is easy to imagine. In our "knowledge economy," economic growth is fueled by education, especially higher education, and the benefits of a growing economy flow down to all sectors, including the least advantaged. This mechanism, though plausible, does not appear to be operative. In a recent review of several books on inequality in the United States, Andrew Hacker notes that more Americans graduate from college each year: "Among men and women in their early thirties, 32% now have a bachelor's degree or better, compared with 25% in 1980 and 14% in 1970."¹¹ But according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the poverty rate has hardly changed during that period. In 1970, it was 10.1%, in 1980, 10.3%, and in 2004, 10.2%. Hacker concludes his review thus:

Yet, along with the increased concentration of wealth, we are seeing millions of Americans being laid off, settling for lower paying jobs, losing health coverage, and watching pensions evaporate. Economic inequality is increasing just as the millions who are born and stay poor are not getting anything like a fair chance to improve their situation.¹²

Of course, income and wealth are not adequate indices of the conditions needed for flourishing. One might envision a redistributive system whereby the higher income earners provided the tax revenues that were then used to provide the resources needed by the least advantaged to flourish — fully paid medical care, salubrious early childhood programs, excellent schools, inexpensive public transportation, and so on. But this clearly did not happen. Here, again, is Hacker: "the meaning of the term 'redistribution' has been changed. It used to mean taxing the better-off to assist society's less fortunate. Today the flow is in the reverse direction."¹³ The fact that an expansion of higher education did nothing to lift the prospects of the least advantaged does not, however, show that there is a direct connection between the expansion of higher education and the continuing plight of the least advantaged. Such a connection *is* supplied by Alison Wolf, an education economist in the United Kingdom:

In the past, many young people of ability left school at 14 or 15 and made major careers via apprenticeship, the labour movement, the armed services and so on. Today, if you do not acquire the right academic credentials...the old pathways are increasingly closed....The symbiosis between educational expansion and labour market opportunities may motivate a good number of those in the middle of the attainment distribution. But it is profoundly demotivating for many others.¹⁴

Although I have identified a number of ways in which the expansion of higher education fails to benefit the least advantaged, my proposal appears to generate liabilities of its own so far as this group is concerned. We have to take note of the fact that under current arrangements the state investment in the college education of the academically able does not cover full tuition. In my own state it covers about two-thirds, so families of college-going students must invest a good deal of their own

money or take out substantial loans. Under my proposal, the state's share would be only half of that, leaving students with the remaining two-thirds. This means that, other things equal, it would be harder for poor families and easier for wealthy families to afford to send their children to college.

Hopefully, other things would *not* be equal, and tuition would be pegged to a family's ability to pay. But I am also hoping that colleges would be forced to scale *back*, becoming more selective and more inclined to invest their limited resources in the academically able regardless of class. I am also hoping, though this may be utopian, that as the population of those going directly from high school to college shrunk, fewer employers would use a college diploma as a way of sorting applicants, providing the less academically inclined more opportunities for economic advancement as well as more opportunities to further their education.

A UTILITARIAN PERSPECTIVE

Not everyone shares Rawls's focus on the least advantaged. Some might adopt a utilitarian perspective, arguing that investment in the postsecondary education of the academically able will provide a higher level of resources and hence more opportunities for flourishing across the society even though, arguably, the least advantaged may fail to benefit. Although the connection between educational expansion and economic growth is dogma in many precincts, there is ample room for skepticism.¹⁵ For example, some countries with high Gross Domestic Product, like the United States, have a large proportion of students attending college; others, like Switzerland, do not. It is undoubtedly true that those who graduate from college earn higher incomes than those who do not, but it does not follow that it is what they have learned in college that has made them more productive.

Stephen Berry, summarizing Wolf's *Does Education Matter? Myths about Education and Economic Growth*, notes,

when employers hire graduates, might they just be looking for a method of ascertaining the ability of a particular candidate, not looking for particular skills? Wolf maintains that the answer to this question is yes. Education has become a socially acceptable method of ranking people. The better educated on the whole tend to be smarter and work harder, and hiring by credentials is convenient, legal and unlikely to lead to trouble.¹⁶

But surely, it will still be claimed, the inventions and discoveries that pave the way to innovative processes that undergird enhanced opportunities for flourishing among the entire population — such as intercontinental communication at the click of a mouse — are due to scientists and engineers with not only college but also postgraduate degrees.

No doubt most are, though it is worth noting that some of the men who recently amassed huge fortunes, including Bill Gates, Michael Dell, Steven Jobs, and Lawrence Ellison, either never attended or did not finish college. The question, though, is not whether a society dedicated to maximizing flourishing demands individuals with the highest levels of education, but what an ever-expanding college sector contributes to that end. Is it the case that with every additional high school graduate who goes to college, the chances for discovering a cure for Alzheimer's disease or cystic fibrosis also increase? I think not.

To see why, consider Robin Bhalla, a senior at the University of Arizona, who was profiled in the *New York Times* in April of 2005. Here is what Bhalla says about college:

“You go so you can get a job and make money when you’re older. But at the same time you get life experiences that are priceless, like networking.” He expects that to pay off: “I’ve made so many connections I never would have been able to make without it, and these are all my friends and people that I know from the bars and from classes, and, you know, people that I’ve hung out with that later in life I’m going to be able to call on and be like: ‘I know you have a job with this company. Do you know if they’re hiring, or can you get me an application? Can I use you as a reference?’”

Mr. Bhalla, 22, a psychology major with a minor in business (grade point average 3.0 on a 4 point scale), says he stopped going to most of his classes after sophomore year and drank excessively four nights a week: usually Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. Nevertheless, he made the dean’s list last spring. He says he has rarely given more than an hour a night for all his courses.

“Teachers say, ‘For every class you should do a certain amount of reading,’ but I never do that,” he says. His routine: toward the end of the semester, scan the readings, review notes to see what the teacher said was important, get the teacher’s study guide. He believes he is not alone. “A lot of people just try and coast by, and don’t do the readings. They try and cheat off the homework, copy their friends. Now that I look back on it, it’s not really hard work,” he says. “I think anybody, if they really sat down and tried to do the work, could do it.”¹⁷

I do not mean to pick on Bhalla, who lists his occupation as “commercial real estate” and his favorite books as “[t]he kind with pictures in them,” on his MySpace website, but he is the perfect emblem of my argument. There is little reason to think that he has earned the right to a disproportionately greater share of the public’s investment in postsecondary share — when compared to a student whose academic performance was insufficient for entry to the University of Arizona. Nor is there any reason to think that an investment in Bhalla’s college education will enhance the welfare or opportunities of the least advantaged. There is no reason to think that the higher earnings made possible by his college diploma had anything to do with the kind of academic learning touted by those who use the phrase “knowledge economy.” Nor is there any reason for utilitarians to think that the state’s investment in Bhalla’s college education will yield a good return in the form of greater flourishing for more people. Not only would he not be likely to make an important medical discovery, he would be unlikely to become a physician.¹⁸ Indeed I would argue that even from his own point of view, Bhalla might have been better off deferring college and banking those vouchers in order to make use of them when he matured and decided there was more to life than partying with friends.

1. Martin P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 249 (emphasis added).

2. See Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chapters 4 and 5; Meira Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chapter 2.

3. I use more global environments rather than familiar ones deliberately because, as Judith Rich Harris has argued, peers are more influential than parents in providing models. See Judith Rich Harris, *The Nurture Assumption* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

4. Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 179.

5. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper, 1990), 71.
6. *Ibid.*, 179.
7. See Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 145.
8. Stephen Macedo, "Homosexuality and the Conservative Mind," *Georgetown Law Journal* 161 (1995), 12.
9. See Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, 117–8.
10. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 303.
11. Andrew Hacker, "The Rich and the Rest," *The New York Review of Books* May 25, 2006, 17.
12. *Ibid.*, 19.
13. *Ibid.*, 16.
14. Alison Wolf, "Educational Expansion: The Worms in the Apple," *IEA Economic Affairs* 25, no. 1 (2005), 38.
15. Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter? Myths about Education and Economic Growth* (London: Penguin Press, 2002); William Easterly, "Barren Land," *Education Next* (2002).
16. Stephen Berry, "The Economics of Education: A Review of Wolf's *Does Education Matter*," *Libertarian Alliance* (2003), <http://www.la-articles.org.uk/eoe.htm>.
17. John Merrow, "Survival of the Fittest," *New York Times Education Life*, April 24, 2005, 21.
18. There were about 750,000 physicians in 2000, about 1 percent of the labor force.

I should like to thank Dan Hausman for valuable feedback in developing the initial argument, as well as Michael Olneck and Ed Feige who gave valuable suggestions. After completing the essay I came across Alexander Brown's well-argued "Equality of Opportunity for Education: One-off or Lifelong," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 40, no. 1 (2006), 63–84, whose argument parallels mine to some degree, but whose emphasis is quite different.