

Private Schools and Queue-Jumping: A Reply to White

MARK JAGO AND IAN KIDD Forthcoming in *Journal of Philosophy of Education*
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Abstract: John White (2016) defends the UK private school system from the accusation that it allows an unfair form of ‘queue jumping’ in university admissions. He offers two responses to this accusation, one based on considerations of harm, and one based on meritocratic distribution of university places. We will argue that neither response succeeds: the queue-jumping argument remains a powerful case against the private school system in the UK. We begin by briefly outlining the queue-jumping argument (§1), before evaluating White’s no-harm (§2) and meritocracy (§3) arguments.

1 The Queue-Jumping Argument

The private schooling system in the UK raises a host of moral questions, many centered around concerns about fairness to those students who lack the financial means to access the system. Our focus here is on university admissions, in which privately educated pupils consistently outperform state school pupils in terms of places gained at the top-ranked UK universities. To take a recent example, research by the Sutton Trust revealed that just eight schools – all in the south-east of England, six private – filled 1,310 Oxbridge places over the years 2015–2017, compared with 1,220 from 2,900 other schools (Montacute 2018). This is in large part because privately educated students achieve higher A-level (or equivalent) grades than state school pupils. There are other factors, including private schools’ providing better information and guidance on university application, the expectations and aspirations of their families, and better preparation of applicants for university interviews. However, we shall focus here on the link between A-level grades and university admissions.

The charge against the private system in this context is that it permits a form of ‘queue jumping’:

Children who, by going private, do better than they would have done at a state school are gaining competitive advantage over others. They are jumping the queue for university places and well-paid or interesting jobs. (Swift 2003, 23)

The ‘queue’ is for entrance to one’s chosen university, which is granted wholly or to a large extent on the basis of one’s A-level (or equivalent) grades. These grades determine one’s place in the queue: typically, the higher they are, the closer to the ‘front’ you are, and so the more likely you are to gain entrance. By paying for private education, you are highly likely to achieve grades higher than you would have achieved through the

state system (Montacute 2018). You thereby improve your position in the queue. Moreover, there's evidence that the more you pay, the more your position in the queue improves. The UK's two most expensive private schools, Eton and Winchester (charging £14,167 and £13,903 per term, respectively, for 2020), are also by far the two most successful of all UK schools in terms of Oxbridge offers (Ashworth et al, 2018). All of this is harmful to state school students, according to the charge.

2 White's No-Harm Argument

White's (2016) first response to the queue-jumping argument is that, whatever the merits of the current system, it does not harm state school students:

If [harm] is tied to a concept of wellbeing based on the satisfaction of one's major preferences, then some state school students ambitious to get into university (or a good university), or to land a top job, are indeed likely to be harmed if their chances of doing so are lessened. But if wellbeing is understood in terms of engagement in intrinsically worthwhile relationships and activities, the situation is more open. It could be that all or some students said to be prevented by private school competition from getting into a Russell Group university or top job still have lives of great wellbeing. If so, it is hard to see how they have been harmed. (White 2016, 499–500)

White's point is that if one adopts a broad conception of wellbeing – 'engagement in intrinsically worthwhile relationships and activities' – then being denied a (good) university place is not all things considered harmful. One can engage in intrinsically worthwhile relationships and activities without a (good) university place. (White sometimes speaks about university places in general, sometimes about places at 'good' universities, and sometimes about places at Russell Group universities. Our response below can be run on any of these readings.)

We will focus here (as White does) on harm to *individual* students. We will set aside the question of group- or society-level harms caused by private schooling (as discussed by Marples 2018), as these are not especially relevant to assessing White's response to the queue-jumping argument. (White (2016 500–505) considers issues of social exclusion caused by private schooling.)

Underlying White's argument is a 'sufficientarian' or 'adequacy' stance on wellbeing, rather than an egalitarian one, on which 'what is important is ... that everyone has enough of whatever good is necessary to equip them to lead a flourishing life' (2016, 498). It would not be harmful for someone to lose out on intellectual or financial enrichment – so the argument goes – as long as their intellectual capacities and financial resources remain *sufficient*.

We agree there's merit in this thought: a fair system of redistributionist taxation need not ensure everyone has an equal income, for example, as long as it

ensures everyone has enough to live a sufficiently resourced life. Nevertheless, White's argument proves too much. If someone is not harmed in losing their place to a queue-jumper, on the grounds that they retain enough of what is important, then they cannot be harmed in being denied that place by any means so long as there is no non-significant loss in what is important. By the same reasoning, it would not be harmful (say) to bar the working classes from university (or from 'good' or Russell Group universities) full stop, so long as those individuals retain enough of what is good to lead a flourishing life. But it seems clear to us that that *would* be deeply harmful. White's argument must be faulty. Let's see why.

We can formulate White's argument as follows:

- (1) X would still lead a life of sufficient wellbeing, even after being deprived of Y.
- (2) Sufficient wellbeing is all that matters when considering harm.
- (3) Therefore, being deprived of Y would not be harmful to X.

Whether this is valid depends primarily on what 'is all that matters' means in the context of (2). To be valid, it must mean:

- (2') Harmful actions always result in a change in overall wellbeing, from sufficient to insufficient.

But (2') is false: one may be severely harmed by some act (say, by being the target of racist abuse) and still lead a life that, overall, is flourishing. So the argument fails. In short, we do not see that there is a generally defensible sufficientarian stance which will support White's conclusion.

3 White's Meritocracy Argument

We now turn to White's second response to the queue-jumping argument, which is independent of the first. He follows Anderson (2004) in arguing that the queue-jumping argument assumes 'that there should be meritocratic equality of opportunity', so that 'competitive, or positional, goods like a university place ... should be awarded solely on the basis of an applicant's abilities and motivation' (White 2016, 500). Such agential capacities are 'developed' rather than innate. He then argues as follows:

Privately educated students may well have their abilities and motivation developed through their schooling; but if they do better than other applicants at getting into university or sought-after employment *solely* as a result of this, there is nothing unfair about what occurs. (2016, 500)

The crucial term here is 'solely'. Some privately educated students may benefit from their crisp, upper middle-class accents conveying just the kind of intellectual

competence and confidence sought by the interviewer. Some may benefit from established links between their private school and admissions tutors in their target university. But set these cases to one side. If a privately educated applicant is *at the point of admission* more able and better motivated than a state school applicant, then it is fair that the private student takes precedence. They merit it, so the argument goes. And this is so, White argues, even if their greater ability and motivation at the point of admission is partly a result of the higher quality of their private schooling.

We disagree. Consider an analogous case: a cinema with 100 seats asks customers to queue until doors open, at which point, tickets are allocated based on one's position in the queue. One's 'merit' is one's place in the queue when the doors open. This system clearly allows for unfair behaviour: someone who pushes in the front of the queue just before the doors open will get a seat at the expense of the (previously) 100th person in the queue. A fair allocation of cinema seats (if it is to be done on a first-come, first-served basis) makes demands on the nature of the queueing system *prior to when doors open*. One may not join the queue in the middle; one may not use force to bump up one's place in the queue, and so on. If one gets one's place in the queue by nefarious means, then the final allocation of seats itself is unfair.

Much the same can be said for the case of university admissions. Ignoring contextual factors (including the kind and performance of the pupil's school) in university admissions is akin to ignoring how an individual got their place in the cinema queue. In general, a judgement of fairness requires us to look to more than just how an individual performs at the point of entry.

This may seem like an anti-meritocratic argument, but it need not be put that way. 'Merit' is not a precise concept: it isn't clear that better grades go hand in hand with higher merit, for example. A student with grades of AAB, from a school whose average grades are CCC, may well have thereby demonstrated more merit than a student with AAA grades, from a school whose average grades are AAB. This point is especially pertinent to university admissions given that privately educated students are less likely to achieve at least an upper second class degree than state school students with similar A-level grades (Vidal Rodeiro and Zanini 2015, 662). Notice that, in making this argument, we are not appealing to the 'genetic' or 'innate' abilities of candidates, as White (2016, 500) suggests his opponent must. We can agree with White that admissions decisions should be based on 'developed' qualities, meritocratically. We avoid White's conclusion, however, by including contextual factors in our assessment of a student's demonstrated merit at the point of admission.

Conclusion

We have argued that neither of White's responses to the queue-jumping argument can be sustained. It may well be harmful to miss out on a university place due to 'queue-jumpers', even if one goes on to lead a sufficiently worthwhile life (§2). And we cannot infer (from a meritocratic premise) that a system is fair, simply by looking at who is first in the queue at the point of admission (§3). We have not attempted to demonstrate

that the private school system is in fact unfair, only that White's case for its fairness fails. But absent a satisfactory response, we find queue-jumping considerations to be powerful in highlighting what we believe to be a deeply unjust system.

References

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