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Two Worries about *Educational Goods*

MICHAEL HAND

In this brief comment on Educational Goods*, I raise two worries about the authors' proposed normative framework for educational decision-makers. The first concerns the omission of rationality, or responsiveness to reasons, from the list of educational goods; the second concerns the inclusion of parental interests in the list of independent values.*

In *Educational Goods*, Harry Brighouse, Helen Ladd, Susanna Loeb and Adam Swift do a fine job of condensing the myriad normative considerations bearing on educational decision-making into a manageable and plausible set of goods and values (Brighouse *et al*., 2018). They go on to show how their normative framework can help decision-makers to think more rigorously and systematically about current policy options in the areas of school finance, school accountability and school autonomy. The book is compelling, concise and accessible—and highly recommended.

In this brief response, I want to raise two worries about the authors' proposed normative framework. The first concerns what strikes me as a significant omission from their list of educational goods. The second concerns their characterisation of one of the 'independent values' against which educational goods must be balanced.

A MISSING GOOD

First, the omission. I agree with the authors that enumerating the plethora of specific educational goods we have reason to value would be a large undertaking, and that the resulting list would be too unwieldy to be of much use to educational decision-makers. Their sensible solution to this problem is to cluster specific educational goods into six categories. These, they say, are 'six capacities that everyone should have in modern societies' and which 'should guide decision-makers in determining what specific educational goods to foster'. The capacities are economic productivity, personal autonomy, democratic competence, healthy personal relationships, treating others as equals and personal fulfilment.

My worry is that this list misses what is arguably the most fundamental of all the capacities with which educators should be concerned; namely, rationality, or responsiveness to reasons. No doubt the six capacities identified involve responsiveness to reasons in particular domains—someone with a capacity for healthy personal relationships, for example,

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is presumably responsive to the reasons we have to avoid abusive or codependent relationships—but they appear to allow for unresponsiveness to reasons outside these domains. Consider the following familiar cases of irrationality:

Case 1: We all have decisively good reasons, both moral and prudential, to reduce our carbon footprints and to support political measures to mitigate climate change. That many people are unresponsive to these reasons is a straightforward failure of rationality.

Case 2: All parents have decisively good reasons, both moral and prudential, to vaccinate their children against preventable contagious diseases. That many parents are unresponsive to these reasons is, again, a clear failure of rationality.

It is a basic task of education to combat irrationality in all areas of human life, including areas like these. Education can do this by equipping young people with the capacity and inclination to attend to, assess, weigh up and act on reasons.

Both climate-change-deniers and anti-vaxxers, it seems to me, can be, and often are, economically productive, personally autonomous, democratically competent and personally fulfilled people who enjoy healthy personal relationships and treat others as equals. If that's right, these six capacities are not adequate to guide decision-makers in determining what specific educational goods to foster.

Perhaps it will be suggested that failures of rationality of the kind I have identified should be addressed by the cultivation of either personal autonomy or democratic competence. But this suggestion is ill-supported by the authors' accounts of these capacities. People are personally autonomous to the extent that they are able to align their 'activities and relationships' with 'their sense of who they are and what matters to them'. Autonomy is the strength of character that enables people to step outside 'the constraints laid down by the religious strictures of their parents', or to resist 'heavy parental pressure to pursue a particular occupational path', when such constraints and pressures inhibit their flourishing. This capacity is undeniably valuable, but it does not touch on the kind of irrationality involved in climate-change-denial and vaccine-refusal.

As for the capacity for democratic competence, the authors conceive it as the ability of citizens 'to use their political institutions both to press their own interests and to give due weight to the legitimate interests of others'. It includes 'obedience to the law', at least most of the time, and 'engagement in the political process'. The problem, once more, is that many climate-change-deniers and anti-vaxxers meet the criteria of being law-abiding, politically engaged and able to press their interests. The things they get wrong are not well described as failures of democratic competence.

What might be done to address this omission? It would be odd simply to add responsiveness to reasons to the existing list of capacities: it is a more fundamental and wide-ranging capacity than the existing six. But nor would it be quite right to construe it as the genus of which the existing six are

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species: the latter all involve knowledge, skills, dispositions and attitudes that go beyond what is involved in responsiveness to reasons. So I do not have a tidy solution to the problem of the missing educational good. But I do think the problem needs solving.

A QUESTIONABLE VALUE

My second worry has to do with the 'independent value' the authors label 'parents' interests'. This, they say, is one of the 'additional values, not in themselves educational, that policy makers must also take into account in many educational decisions'. Their discussion of this value is brief, but they give a couple of examples of parental interests with clear relevance to matters of education policy. One is the interest of religious parents in 'raising their children as members of a particular faith', which is relevant to the debate about faith schools; the second is the interest of 'wealthy parents in conferring advantage on their children', which is relevant to the debate about elite private schools.

I do not want to deny that parents have interests of these kinds. It is plausible to hold that people have an interest in the fulfilment of their 'relatively deep-rooted and stable wants' (Feinberg, 1987, p. 45), and there is little doubt that many religious and wealthy parents have deep-rooted and stable wants with respect to their children's religious beliefs and economic prosperity. What I do want to deny is that educational decision-makers have any reason to *value* parental interests of these kinds. Far from being valuable, parents' interests in fixing their children's religious beliefs and in giving them unearned advantages in the job market are at best ethically neutral and at worst ethically bad. To characterise them as values against which educational goods must be balanced is a serious mistake.

In this case, I do have a suggestion for rectifying the problem. The independent value to which decision-makers should give weight is not parental *interests*, but a rather narrower set of considerations we might better describe as parental *rights*. Two of the authors of *Educational Goods*, Brighouse and Swift, have elsewhere discussed at some length the parental rights that should be upheld by the state (Brighouse and Swift, 2014). They argue, convincingly, that the scope of parental rights is set by what is 'essential for the child's fundamental interests to be adequately met' and what is 'essential for the important goods distinctively made available by the familial relationship' (p. 125). Educational policy makers must certainly take into account the rights of parents to protect their children's fundamental interests and realise familial relationship goods; but they need not assign value to the fulfilment of any and all deep-rooted and stable parental wants.

Substituting parental rights for parental interests would immediately exclude from consideration any desire on the part of wealthy parents to confer competitive advantage on their children and any preference they might have for elite private education. As Brighouse and Swift put it: 'The bottom line, then, is that parents do not have the right generally to benefit their children by conferring advantage on them in a way that undermines fair equality of opportunity' (p. 137). I think it would also exclude from consideration

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any desire on the part of parents to fix their children's religious beliefs and any preference they might have for faith-based education—though here it is less clear that Brighouse and Swift would agree. To be sure, they hold that parents have a duty to attend to their children's fundamental interest in becoming autonomous, and that 'it is wrong for parents to treat [their children] as vehicles for their own self-expression, or as means to the realisation of their own views on controversial questions about how to live' (p. 174). But they also hold that 'valuable familial relationships require parents to be free to engage with their children in ways that produce mutual identification and reflect the parents' judgments about what is valuable in life' (p. 151), and they seem inclined to allow that this might entitle parents 'to have their children attend schools that will reinforce the message' (p. 149). If that is their inclination, it is misguided: the realisation of familial relationship goods may well involve some sharing and shaping of values in the home, but it affords no basis for a parental right to choose schools that aim to instil and consolidate religious beliefs.

Insofar as they feature on a list of 'values relevant to decisions about education', then, parental interests should be replaced with parental rights. This is not to say that educational decision-makers can safely ignore what parents want for their children, whether the wants in question are deep-rooted and stable or knee-jerk and transient. Parents are obviously stakeholders in their children's education, and policies that ride roughshod over their preferences are unlikely to be successful. But the right way to think about parental preferences is as salient features of the context in which education policies are formed and enacted. They are facts to be accommodated and, sometimes, obstacles to be overcome; they are not, in and of themselves, bearers of normative weight.

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