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Education, Ethics of



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Introduction

The ethics of education encompasses a wide array of issues and has a long history in the Western tradition of philosophy. The issues center around normative justifications of the aims and means of education (cf. Brighouse 2009). In addition, they also include fundamental critiques of pursuing ethical aims through education (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1979; Illich 1972; Meyer-Drawe 1990; Ricken and Balzer 2012; Ricken and Rieger-Ladich 2004). Along the lines of the standard partition of Western ethics into *virtue ethics*, *consequentialist ethics*, and *deontological ethics*, one can distinguish virtue ethical, consequentialist, and deontological theories of education. The virtue ethical approaches are found most prominently in the ancient philosophical works of Plato (1991) and Aristotle (1958), whereas the modern and contemporary approaches to the

ethics of education tend to be consequentialist or deontological. Plato, in *The Republic* (1991, 111/433a-b), elaborates on matters of education at great length. The most conducive educational institutions and practices must ensure that members of the three different groups of the ideally just – and the happiest – city would form and maintain the virtues that correspond to their societal roles. For example, future philosopher kings and queens should be educated outside their families to promote their identification with the common good. For Aristotle (1958, 332/1337a), it is also clear that “citizens of a state should always be educated to suit the constitution of their state.” Similarly, philosophers suggested many educational proposals and reforms in the Enlightenment period to enable the formation of a new society consisting of autonomous subjects. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1979), Mary Wollstonecraft (2014), and Immanuel Kant (1960) defended various pedagogical measures for developing the moral competence of following moral imperatives. The focus of this chapter, however, is neither on educational theories from ancient ethics nor on those from the Enlightenment period. Instead, it discusses contemporary consequentialist and deontological theories of the aims of educations (cf. also Culp 2020). Moreover, this entry also touches upon, but does not discuss at length, the various normative aspects of the means of education that are currently discussed within debates about citizenship education (cf. Nussbaum 1996;

In M.N.S. Sellers and Professor Stephan Kirste (eds.), Section Editor for Applied Legal Philosophy: Norbert Paulo, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy* (Cham: Springer, online).

Callan 2004; Satz 2007; Honneth 2015; Crittenden and Levine 2016).

Human Capital Formation

Gary Becker and other economists with an interest in the ethics of education have conceived education as the formation of human capital (Becker 1993; Schultz 1963; Mincer 1974). On this view, education – whether it takes place at home, in school, or in universities – is understood as the development of economically valuable knowledge, skills, and competences. Education can thus be expressed as an economic or monetary value, since it is possible to calculate the increases in productivity resulting from the attainment of educational degrees or the study of certain academic disciplines. The central insight of the human capital formation view of education is that that formal secondary and especially tertiary education contribute significantly to increasing economic productivity. These forms of education thereby support the growth of economic activity, which has led most of the economically advanced countries throughout the world to increase the share of each cohort gaining a secondary or tertiary educational degree. From a consequentialist perspective that regards the augmentation of economic goods and services as an important indicator of human well-being, human capital formation thus counts as ethically desirable.

Virtually all educational theorists, regardless of whether they adopt such a consequentialist perspective, accept the ethical relevance of an education that prepares students for their future professional roles. To further elaborate, even deontological theorists like Kant (1960) emphasize the importance that professional preparation through education has for the development of a sense of self-worth. Nevertheless, theorists like Ingrid Robeyns (2006), Martha Nussbaum (2010), or myself (Culp 2019) criticize the human capital formation perspective for adopting an *exclusively* resources-oriented perspective on education. They object that the human capital formation perspective primarily views students as instruments within the ongoing economic

processes, rather than as subjects capable of determining their own ends. In addition, they criticize that this perspective neglects distributional issues of how the economic gains that are realized through greater productivity should be realized and thus also the role that education plays in generating certain inegalitarian distributional outcomes.

Equality of Educational Opportunity

Inegalitarian socioeconomic outcomes, which seem unavoidable in market societies, are the major reason why several educational theorists like Brighouse and Swift (2006, 2009a, b, 2014a, b) insist on the importance of equality of educational opportunity. A central idea of equality of educational opportunity is that the inegalitarian socioeconomic outcomes are justifiable to the extent that they result from a fair competition. For this competition for socioeconomic positions to which unequal salaries are attached to be fair, however, Brighouse and Swift argue that students' chances for educational success must not be influenced by the students' social background or their natural talents for academic success. Equality of educational opportunity can thus be understood as expressing a deontological concern with fairness in the context of educational policies and practices.

On the liberal egalitarian version of equality of educational opportunity, it is only the students' social background conditions which must not influence the students' opportunities for educational success, whereas the students' natural talents and their motivation to exercise effort for achieving academic success may influence these opportunities. On the socialist version of equality of educational opportunity, by contrast, it is only the students' motivation to exercise effort that may have an influence on their economic opportunities. In both versions, the liberal egalitarian and the socialist version of equality of educational opportunity, a central idea is that it is unfair if students have lesser educational opportunities through no fault of their own and for which they thus cannot reasonably be held responsible.

Therefore, educational institutions like schools and universities should be designed to provide those students who come from disadvantaged social backgrounds and who have lesser natural talents with greater educational resources.

Critics observe, however, that the effort that students exercise may also be viewed as the result of students' social or natural circumstances for which they cannot be held responsible (Brighouse and Swift 2014a, 16). Yet compensating those students who exercise less effort to excel in education would lead the idea of equality of opportunity ad absurdum, because it would essentially require equalizing educational outcomes. Another critique of equality of educational opportunity, which I have also put forward myself, is that it is epistemically very difficult to determine the relative degree of natural talent and academic effort (Culp 2019, Chap. 3; Giesinger 2021). And yet another critique holds that the realization of equality of educational opportunity would violate parents' educational liberties by asking them from socioeconomically or culturally advantaged backgrounds to refrain from contributing to their children's education, e.g., by sending them to private schools (Anderson 2004; Anderson 2007; Satz 2007). This critique has led defenders of equality of educational opportunity to develop an account of legitimate parental partiality that allows distinguishing between those ways of conferring educational advantages that fall within the scope of parents' educational liberties and those that do not (Brighouse and Swift 2009b, 2014b).

Prioritarianism

The prioritarian view of education endorses the prioritarian principle that the worse off a person is, the more it matters that this person benefits from a valuable good (cf. Parfit 1997). Based on this principle, prioritarian educational theorists like Gina Schouten (2012) argue that it is permissible to allow inequalities of educational opportunities on the condition that these inequalities benefit the worst-off students. On Schouten's view, the worst-off students are those who have the worst all-things-considered life prospects for

flourishing, and it is the task of educational policy and of teachers to improve these prospects of those who have the worst prospects. Prioritarianism in education thus adopts a primarily welfare-consequentialist perspective.

In pedagogical terms, this need not imply, however, that teachers should improve the opportunities for educational success of those students who are worst off in this sense. This is because these students may benefit more from learning general skills that are especially important for persons' overall well-being, for example, skills of how to navigate difficult personal relationships (cf. Schouten 2012, 479). In addition, by allowing those who are better off in terms of their all-things-considered prospects for flourishing to benefit from greater educational opportunities than others, those who will therefore be better educated can use their knowledge and skills for improving the all-things-considered prospects of the worst off (cf. Schouten 2012, 486). For example, it is possible to imagine that those who are better off overall and who enjoy greater educational opportunities will develop novel pedagogical techniques of how to ameliorate the learning of students with cognitive or physical disabilities and who may be among the worst-off students (cf. Schouten 2012, 479).

Liberal Perfectionist Education

A liberal perfectionist conception of education is also primarily concerned with well-being (cf. Brighouse 2006; Meyer 2011). Different from prioritarianism, however, it is not necessarily most concerned about the well-being of the least well off, and liberal perfectionism is also much more explicit than prioritarianism in its articulation of both its notion of well-being and the ways in which education contributes to human flourishing. To elaborate further, liberal perfectionist education regards the realization of personal autonomy as the highest good that human beings can achieve. Indeed, there is a great variety of understandings of (personal) autonomy. However, many liberal perfectionist theorists of education seem to agree that autonomy involves at

least the capacity for deliberate choice among a variety of adequate options (cf. Raz 1986). Education must contribute to students' development of (personal) autonomy by way of honing their cognitive skills that allow them making informed and judicious choices, as well as by presenting them with a variety of models of what a good life may be. In that way education – at home, in schools, and at universities – should prepare adolescents to decide for themselves as to which conception of the good they want to pursue throughout their life, given that such (personal) autonomy is of such great importance for human flourishing.

Liberal perfectionism is often conceived as a certain ideal of an autonomous individual, and thus as individualistic. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that different from this individualist understanding, the most influential defense of liberal perfectionism, provided by Joseph Raz (1986), was based on a holistic understanding of individuals' embeddedness within social relationships. Raz clearly states that the ethical importance of individual autonomy arises from within a liberal culture that ascribes ethical importance to this type of autonomy. What is more, within the Hegelian tradition of liberalism that also defends the importance of education for autonomy, special emphasis is laid on the social relationships within which individuals can develop into autonomous persons. As Krassimir Stojanov (2016, 2020) clarifies in his Hegelian account of education for autonomy, for example, educational institutions must foster those kinds of social relationships through which individuals mutually recognize one another as beings who have desires and needs, who demand a respectful treatment as equal normative authorities, and who can make valuable contributions to societal cooperation, for only if students interact within relationships of recognition in which they recognized and recognize others as these types of beings can they gain self-love, a sense of self-worth, and self-esteem (cf. Honneth 1995). And they need these kinds of relationships so that they can transcend the limitations of their familial and other places of primary belonging. This kind of self-transcendence then represents or instantiates education.

One critique of autonomy as educational aim points out that by way of promoting autonomy through such education, a liberal political order may suffer from a lack of legitimacy (cf. Brighouse 1998). This is because, this critique says, through the teaching of autonomy, the consent that citizens give to a liberal political order may count as manipulated and hence as inadequate for legitimizing the normative authority of a liberal state. In response, however, liberal perfectionist educational theorists have argued that they do not defend the promotion of autonomy through education but merely call for enabling or facilitating the exercise of autonomy. Thereby citizens' consent to a liberal political normative authority can properly count as voluntary and thus as an effective legitimation of a liberal state. I have questioned, however, whether the distinction between autonomy-promoting and autonomy-facilitating education is in practice of significant relevance to justify the claim that only the former but not the latter may count as a way of indoctrinating students to endorse liberal political values (Culp 2022a). Another widespread and powerful critique of liberal perfectionist education is that adherents of religions and nonreligious persons may not accept the realization of (personal) autonomy as the highest good that contributes most to their personal flourishing. As Rawls (2005) has pointed out, persons may endorse a non-liberal conception of the good life which is nevertheless reasonable. Such non-liberal conceptions may put less emphasis on the possibility or exercise of autonomy and may view the pursuit of a religious life as the highest good. Several educational theorists, including myself, have therefore argued that adherents of such a conception can rightfully question the legitimacy of the imposition of autonomy-facilitating or autonomy-promoting education by a liberal state (cf. Costa 2011; Culp 2019).

Political Liberal and Neo-republican Education

Political liberals and neo-republican theorists of education have therefore argued that the state's

educational policies in the form of various kinds of citizenship education should not focus on the promotion of personal autonomy as a way of contributing to citizens' well-being (cf. also Burt 2003). Instead, citizenship education should concentrate on citizens' realization of that kind of autonomy that they require to avoid domination (Dagger 1997; Costa 2011; Culp 2019). According to neo-republican political thought, domination consists in the arbitrary interference of someone's will on someone else, and it can occur either in interpersonal or in political relationships (cf. Pettit 1997, 2012; Forst 2013). The emphasis on contributing to the avoidance of domination thus highlights the importance of inhibiting the occurrence of a certain type of injustice – domination. Hence, different from the liberal perfectionist perspective, the political liberal or neo-republican conception of education can be understood as expressing a primarily deontological, rights-based perspective rather than a welfarist perspective of the type that liberal perfectionist autonomy education represents. Costa (2011, 86) nicely explains the normative appeal of such a political liberal or neo-republican understanding of education as follows: "The positive value that reasonable people may give to ideals of personal autonomy can vary, since any such ideals will be controversial. But one can expect much wider agreement on the claim that domination is *prima facie* bad and that there are good reasons to avoid or prevent it."

The pursuit of avoiding domination has the goal of enabling politically egalitarian relationships among citizens who recognize their reasonable disagreements about the good life and educational policy but are nevertheless willing to construct their political society together. Thereby it is congenial not only to concerns of multicultural accommodation in education (cf. Reich 2003) but also to a democratic understanding of politics and education (cf. Dewey 1980). Such a democratic understanding, according to Amy Gutmann (1987, 11), "makes a democratic virtue out of our inevitable disagreement over educational problems." The educational and political ideal that is animating this democratic perspective is one of *political autonomy or self-legislation*,

whereby democratic citizens, as Gutmann (1987, 39) explains, "aspire to a set of educational practices and authorities of which the following can be said: these are the practices and authorities to which we, acting collectively as a society, have consciously agreed." By following this democratic interpretation of the non-domination-based conception of educational theory, political liberal or neo-republican educational theorists aim at preparing future citizens for participating respectfully in political decision-making. Thus, these theorists emphasize the virtue of tolerating others that hold different views as well as the virtue of reasonability, which requires being willing to identify principles, policies, and practices that can mutually be accepted as fair. As Costa (2011, 67) explains: "Reasonability requires ... the capacity for reciprocity, which involves being capable of making proposals that one considers fair, and being willing to listen and discuss others' proposals, all of which requires understanding the others' points' of views." All citizens should learn to recognize each other as equal normative authorities in matters of politics and education, even if they will necessarily disagree on fundamental ethical questions and thus cannot base their common political life on a shared ethical consensus (cf. Laden 2013).

Conclusion

This entry provided an overview of alternative – consequentialist and deontological – positions in contemporary ethics of education and highlighted how they differ in their characterization of the aims of education. Despite the dominance of the consequentialist and deontological perspectives on the aims of education, at least within the Anglophone literature, there exist also some virtue ethical positions. A prominent case in point is the position of Danielle Allen (2015), who views *participatory readiness* as a virtue that should be taught because its exercise contributes to human flourishing in private, social, and political spheres. There is also a wide-ranging discussion on the ethical means of education, which this entry did not present in detail. Johannes Drerup (2021), for

example, has recently analyzed the relevance of controversial debates in classrooms for the promotion of democratic virtues such as reasonability. This entry thus focused on merely one among several important strands of the ethical theorization of education.

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