

EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE AND THE VALUE OF EXCELLENCE

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PROMOTING educational justice and nurturing educational excellence are two values many hold dear. Education systems declare their commitment to realizing both, yet in many cases, there is inescapable tension between them. While educational justice typically entails prioritizing the needs of low achievers in decisions concerning institutional design, educational practices, and resource allocation, developing educational excellence presumably requires preferring the needs of those already educationally advantaged.

For example, prioritizing educational excellence might require investing scarce educational resources in developing gifted programs instead of providing these resources to children with low and average abilities, even if they have yet to obtain rudimentary educational skills. Other policy decisions involve irresolvable tension between the two goals, even when there is no shortage of resources. Thus, the most beneficial student assignment policy for low achievers typically involves mixed-ability classes, whereas separating high-ability students to designated programs may be preferable for developing excellence. Assignment policy cannot reconcile these opposing requirements and requires prioritizing one over the other. And finally, pedagogical and curriculum choices can benefit students with a specific set of abilities and be less suitable for others. Therefore policy decisions as well as everyday classroom practices often require making tough decisions and prioritizing the development of the abilities of some students over the abilities of others.

The tension described above between developing excellence on the one hand and developing more mundane abilities on the other hand is one of the most basic tensions in the educational justice literature. It is also the starting point and the motivational driving force of this paper, which aims to contribute to the discussion of this distributive dilemma through the exploratory examination of the concept of excellence.

One approach to resolving the tension is to compare the case of ability to the distribution of wealth. Theories of distributive justice contend with similar issues and must evaluate policies that will affect the distribution of wealth between individuals who are unequally well-off. The solutions offered

by theories of distributive justice might be applicable to the dilemma at hand. Notwithstanding significant variation between their prescriptions, many theories of distributive justice accord initial priority to those who are less well-off. Despite that priority, in the appropriate circumstances, many theories of justice allow the better-off to benefit despite their favorable starting point. For example, our concern for the disadvantaged should not prevent allocating resources to ensure political participation for all, including the wealthy. Also, when investment in those already better-off results in large returns, and especially when these returns benefit everyone, including the worst-off (by creating jobs, technological developments, etc.), accumulation of additional wealth by the well-off is often considered justified.

The same considerations may apply in the educational domain, creating a duty to invest in all children, including those who are already better-off, especially when investing in high-achieving students can potentially benefit many people, including the least well-off.¹

Yet despite these similarities, an interesting disanalogy emerges between the educational domain and distributive justice more generally. Theories of distributive justice routinely require inhibiting the accumulation of wealth for the sake of redistributing it to the less well-off. If the urgent needs of the poor require it, we would not be especially troubled if none of those who are better-off become extremely rich.² Taking from the rich is an inseparable component of distributive justice.

On the other hand, in the educational domain, despite the moral importance of promoting the educationally disadvantaged, hindering the development of educational excellence at the very top of the distribution of abilities is not treated with the same indifference. As Harry Brighouse states, “If we worry too much about ensuring that the least advantaged get a fair shot at labour market advantage, we jeopardize the production and discovery of excellence.”³ As opposed to the loss of wealth, the loss of excellent talent seems to many to be intuitively undesirable, even if that loss facilitates the development of the educationally disadvantaged. This suggests that developing excellence is special in some way that renders the standard considerations of distributive justice inapplicable.

Yet while many might share the intuitive aversion toward policies that “jeopardize the production of excellence,” philosophers have not developed

1 Brighouse and Swift, “The Place of Educational Equality”; Meyer, “Talent Advancement”; and Harel Ben Shahar, “Distributive Justice in Education and Conflicting Interests.”

2 Beyond a certain threshold, some even argue that surplus wealth has “zero moral weight,” since people are already fully flourishing. See Robeyns, “Having Too Much.”

3 Brighouse, “Educational Equality and School Reform,” 39.

a principled moral argument that supports this intuition and examines its implications. They have not discussed *why* developing excellence is important—specifically, whether it is important “for its own sake” or for instrumental reasons—nor do they provide a systematic account of how we ought to balance the concern for developing excellence with duties we have toward the least advantaged (in resource allocation, student assignment, or education practices). Within the educational justice debate, the importance of developing excellence “is more asserted than argued for.”⁴ For example, Brighouse attests that he values high ability and even values it “for its own sake,” although he admits he “can’t give much of a justification for valuing it.”⁵ Elizabeth Anderson also maintains that “the development of human talents is a great intrinsic good, a good to the person who has it, and a good to others,” but does not explain why we should value developing human talent for its own sake nor how this consideration should be factored in complicated real-life decisions.⁶

Instead, there is some philosophical discussion concerning educational practices that focus on nurturing excellence, such as gifted education and private or selective schools.⁷ These contributions (some of them supportive of practices that prioritize excellence and others that criticize them) discuss the definition of educational excellence and spell out the tension between developing it and promoting other educational goals. But these too do not scrutinize the value of developing high ability, which they take for granted.

The lack of principled examination of the value of excellence is unfortunate, as it might lead to misguided decisions in distributive dilemmas of the sort presented above; more specifically, the aversion to loss of excellence might result in giving the development of excellence more than its due moral weight, thereby undermining policy aimed at promoting students with low abilities.

To contribute to an informed discussion of the tension between developing excellent versus low or average abilities, this paper takes a closer look at excellence. It is an exploratory project that aims to discover what makes developing excellent ability valuable, whether it is valuable for its own sake, and whether the value of developing excellence is special compared to developing ability at any other level. If developing excellence is indeed unique, further questions

4 Brighouse, “Educational Equality and School Reform,” 40.

5 Brighouse, “Educational Equality and School Reform,” 39–40.

6 Anderson, “Fair Opportunity in Education,” 615.

7 See, for example, Sapon-Shevin, “Playing Favorites”; Meyer, “Educational Justice and Talent Advancement”; Merry, “Educational Justice and the Gifted”; Swift, *How Not to Be a Hypocrite*; Mazie, “Equality, Race and Gifted Education”; Mason, “Fair Equality of Opportunity and Selective Secondary Schools”; and Harel Ben Shahar, “Ability and Ability Grouping.”

involve whether it should outweigh the value of developing ability at other levels and how it affects our duties to the educationally disadvantaged.

The conclusion, in a nutshell, is that developing excellent ability is valuable in numerous instrumental and noninstrumental ways to those who possess it as well as to others, but all kinds of value created by developing excellence are created also by developing ability at other, lower levels. Since the same *kind* of value is created by developing all abilities (albeit in different amounts), decisions concerning education policy (such as resource allocation, pedagogy, student assignment, and so on) should be made by weighing the gains and costs of alternative educational options and would thereby result more often than not in favoring the development of abilities at the lower end of the “ability continuum.” Thus, I suggest that in many cases, our intuitive aversion to restricting programs aimed at developing excellence is misguided.

Sections 2–5 of the paper explore several ways in which excellence is valuable. Section 2 examines the immense instrumental (financial and vocational) value of developing excellent abilities for the individuals possessing them and for others who enjoy their exercise. Both of these types of value, I argue, are not special to developing excellent abilities and are generated by developing ability at any level, including the low and average levels of ability. And while we may think that developing excellence generates more value than developing abilities in the lower range, I offer several explanations why in many cases—if not most cases—developing the abilities of the least advantaged is in fact more beneficial than developing excellence.

Sections 3–6 discuss the value of developing excellence that is not vested in its vocational or financial consequences. Gaining a deep understanding of the world, appreciating art and literature, and developing high-order thinking skills are valuable for individuals not only because of what they can “do” with these abilities but also as an end in themselves (section 3). Further, we might think that human excellence is impersonally valuable, meaning that it is a good thing even if it is not good for anyone in particular—a possibility developed in section 4. Finally, in section 5, I examine how excellence is valuable because it elicits inspiration, which is a noninstrumentally valuable human experience.

Analysis of these three noninstrumental types of value leads, perhaps surprisingly, to similar conclusions as the examination of vocational and financial value in section 2. In other words, I argue that developing ability at any level creates the same kind of benefit, although the amount of value may vary. Enjoying rational capacities, appreciating reading, and comprehending the world we live in are valuable at all levels of ability, not only at the highest range. For example, working hard to improve one’s guitar-playing skills even if the result

is amateurish is valuable for the same reasons as honing virtuosic guitar-playing abilities. Impersonal value and inspiration can also be generated, I argue, by developing lower abilities. Accomplishments that are mediocre in absolute terms can inspire awe if obtaining them involves overcoming extraordinary difficulties.

If this is the case, there is nothing special in the value that is created by developing excellence, and the value of developing excellence is on par with developing abilities in general. As a result, developing excellence cannot stand as an independent consideration in debates concerning policy design or resource allocation, let alone automatically override the concern for developing low abilities. Instead, decisions regarding policy and resource allocation must assume that each choice entails developing some students' abilities and should consider *how much* value is developed in each case and at what cost. "Demistifying" excellence by showing that the value it creates is comparable to the value created by developing all human ability serves to reassure us that although we may be intuitively averse to compromising the development of excellent human potential, it is often the inescapable and justified outcome of what we are morally required to do.

The final section of the paper offers some guidance for balancing the value of developing excellence with the value of developing ability at other levels. Since developing abilities at all levels is valuable for the same kinds of reasons, decision-making must be sensitive to facts and weigh all the relevant moral considerations. Philosophers can contribute to this, as many already do, by offering careful, empirically informed analysis of specific practices and general principles. A sophisticated understanding of the value of excellence (and other abilities) is indispensable in such endeavors. I argue further that although developing ability has various kinds of value, when confronted with concrete cases of balancing, our primary concern should be with the vocational and financial (i.e., instrumental) gains of developing ability. The noninstrumental value of developing ability, which is the focus of this paper, is typically less morally urgent as well as less tangible than some of the instrumental gains of developing ability and therefore should be relegated to secondary status.

Before proceeding to these conclusions, however, I set the stage by defining the concepts *ability* and *excellence*.

1. ABILITY AND EXCELLENCE

While there may be various ways to understand excellence, my focus on education and the development of excellence therin means that it is useful first to define ability. However, defining ability in the context of education is "complex

and fraught with difficulty.”⁸ The “chronic ambiguity” that the concept suffers from is related to the fact that “ability” has several different meanings and is used in many different contexts.⁹ There are countless different human abilities and talents; some need serious work and training to develop, while others come naturally to most people. Even within the educational domain, numerous types of abilities are relevant—including specific skills such as solving mathematical problems and more general capabilities such as critical thinking.

“Ability” is also often used interchangeably with other terms, including intelligence, IQ, talent, aptitude, skills, and more.¹⁰ All of these have slightly different meanings and are used by scientists and educators to describe different things. To make things even more complicated, not all abilities that philosophers refer to in their work can be measured by empirical tools, creating discrepancies between theoretical policy recommendations and what is possible in practice.

Absent a single “correct” definition, the appropriate understanding of ability depends on the topic and context of the discussion and needs to be explicitly stated in each case. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the type of abilities that are specifically relevant to schools, namely, those developed by schools and by educators. This, I think, is the way in which most of the philosophical work on educational justice uses the term.

This very tentative definition, however, needs further explanation. Specifically, there are two questions that need to be answered to make the definition more precise. First, when discussing educational justice and especially duties concerning the development of abilities, we must understand what abilities schools can (and should?) develop and perhaps also obtain knowledge concerning the abilities they actually do develop as a matter of fact. (Schools inevitably vary significantly in their success in developing abilities.) The second question concerns the difference between abilities that schools develop and the abilities that schools measure, since it is often the case that schools measure (and reward) only one subset of the important abilities they develop. Thus, while schools can nurture various “soft” skills, such as communication skills, time management, problem-solving, and leadership skills, these are rarely measured in any systematic way. An account of the duties of educational justice concerning ability should take all of these into consideration.

As to the first issue—namely, which kinds of abilities schools can and do develop—the practice of education (and schooling more specifically) is based

⁸ Terzi, “On Educational Excellence,” 96. See also Harel Ben Shahar, “Ability and Ability Grouping”; Marley-Payne, “Rethinking Nature and Nurture in Education”; and Robb, “Talent Dispositionalism.”

⁹ Harel Ben Shahar, “Ability and Ability Grouping,” 401.

¹⁰ Robb, “Talent Dispositionalism.”

on a working assumption according to which schools are able to develop students' abilities (at least some abilities and to some extent). The assumption seems self-evidently true, since schools are clearly successful in developing abilities to perform certain actions.¹¹ For example, schools teach children to read and write and to solve basic mathematical problems. Most would also agree that schools (when they are adequate) can develop additional abilities that are not as particular as these skills. For example, schools develop "domain independent" skills such as critical thinking, the ability to construct and evaluate logical arguments, and more.

The possibility that educational interventions performed in schools can improve "general ability" or intelligence is more contested. The consensus in the scientific community is that abilities in general (and intelligence more specifically) are only partly hereditary, and abilities are a result of a "dynamic interplay between genes and experience."¹² Education (and schools more specifically) can therefore potentially affect general ability. Indeed, some studies show that simply attending school has positive effects on tests that evaluate domain-independent cognitive skills.¹³ Educational interventions are especially promising for young children and children whose environments are not sufficiently nurturing.¹⁴ The possibility of successful intervention in such cases may have significant import in terms of the scope of efforts we are morally required to invest in children whose background circumstances may have impaired their ability. Despite this optimistic possibility, except in extreme cases (such as children who have been abused), the effect of educational interventions on general abilities is probably limited, and general ability is a relatively stable property of individuals.¹⁵

¹¹ Thompson, "A Limited Defense of Talent as a Criterion for Access to Educational Opportunities"; and Harel Ben Shahar, "Ability and Ability Grouping."

¹² Sweatt, "The Emerging Field of Neuroepigenetics," 624; Carroll, *Human Cognitive Abilities*; Marley-Payne, "Rethinking Nature and Nurture in Education"; and Harel Ben Shahar, "Redefining Ability, Saving Educational Meritocracy."

¹³ Ceci and Williams, "Schooling, Intelligence, and Income;" McCrea, Mueller, and Parrila, "Quantitative Analyses of Schooling Effects on Executive Function in Young Children"; Burrage et al., "Age and Schooling Related Effects on Executive Functions in Young Children"; and Bergman Nutley, "Gains in Fluid Intelligence after Training Non-Verbal Reasoning in 4-Year-Old Children."

¹⁴ Finn et al., "Cognitive Skills, Student Achievement Tests, and Schools."

¹⁵ Some critics argue that educational interventions merely improve test-taking skills and cannot affect general ability. See Steinberg, "My House Is a Very Very Very Fine House"; Finn et al., "Cognitive Skills, Student Achievement Tests, and Schools"; and Neisser et al., "Intelligence."

The second challenge is the discrepancy between the abilities that schools develop and the abilities that schools measure. Tests administered in schools, especially standardized tests, often focus on knowledge and a narrow subset of skills, failing to evaluate other cognitive abilities and skills.¹⁶ Psychological and emotional skills (such as self-regulation, coping with frustration, and resilience), social skills, and social and cultural capital are also developed in schools, and they are important in the production of excellence; yet they are not measured in tests and evaluations. Tests are also notoriously prone to biases, and therefore their reliability in measuring even narrow abilities is questionable.¹⁷ An account of educational justice that focuses only on the abilities that are currently measured in schools may be overly narrow and overlook many abilities developed in schools (as well as inequalities in the development of these abilities).

For the sake of this article, I choose a definition that encompasses more than the abilities developed and measured by schools, following Lorella Terzi's recent conceptual analysis of educational excellence.¹⁸ Her definition of ability is pluralistic in two ways. First, it includes capabilities that are detected in tests but also what Terzi characterizes as qualitative achievements involving deep understanding, critical skills, creativity, etc.; and second, it includes abilities in various areas that are developed in schools (traditional academic subjects) but also art, physical abilities, and more.¹⁹ This definition does not take schools as they are—not all schools develop and measure all of these skills—but it also does not significantly depart from contemporary schools as we know them, nor does it adopt a completely idealized version of schooling.

Moving on from the concept of “ability” to “excellence,” I part ways with Terzi's definition. Terzi defines educational excellence as high but not extraordinary achievement, whereas I am interested in abilities in the highest range, of the kind that schools assume justify special programs and treatment such as gifted education. This choice is driven by the underlying dilemma that motivates the paper, namely, whether (and when) the importance of developing excellence outweighs our concern for the educationally disadvantaged. The strongest case for prioritizing excellence can be made, I think, by considering the development of outstanding rather than merely high abilities, and I define

¹⁶ Gardner, “Multiple Intelligences”; and Bloomberg, “Multiple Intelligences, Judgement, and Realization of Value.” But see also White, “Illusory Intelligences.”

¹⁷ Erwin and Worrell, “Assessment Practices and the Underrepresentation of Minority Students in Gifted and Talented Education”; Ford, “Desegregating Gifted Education”; Garda, “The New IDEA”; and Steinberg, “My House Is a Very Very Very Fine House.”

¹⁸ Terzi, “On Educational Excellence.”

¹⁹ Terzi, “On Educational Excellence,” 98, 101.

excellence accordingly. It is these extraordinary abilities that are needed to create sterling accomplishments that are deemed especially socially valuable.²⁰ If excellence should be given priority over fostering ability in general, the best justification might be found at the very top of the scale.²¹ Clearly, though, the conclusions of this exploration will have normative import for high ability more widely construed.

Another comment concerns the possibility that students may demonstrate excellent abilities in one domain and mediocre or even low abilities in other domains.²² Although we are accustomed to thinking of students as “high ability,” “gifted,” or “low ability” without making distinctions between different academic abilities, this is often oversimplistic. For our discussion, this means that policy-making needs to be able to make nuanced decisions, sometimes prioritizing a specific student in one domain (say, foreign languages) and deeming that same student a low priority in another (art, for example).

2. DEVELOPING EXCELLENT ABILITY AS A MEANS TO OTHER ENDS

I should say at this point that the categorization of the different types of value, especially the distinction between instrumental and noninstrumental value, is itself the subject of much dispute and theorization.²³ For example, developing high ability is valuable because it enables a person to enjoy literature. This value could be classified as noninstrumental because it does not lead to any financial or vocational rewards. It could, however, be classified as instrumental, depending on one’s notion of intrinsic value. Since hedonists consider pleasure as intrinsically valuable, developing high ability even if only for personal

²⁰ Cooper, *Illusions of Equality*; and Kramer, *Liberalism with Excellence*.

²¹ Another difference between my conception of excellence and Terzi’s is that I am interested in excellence of individuals, whereas Terzi focuses on excellence as a property of education systems. See Terzi, “On Educational Excellence,” 93n3. My interest in the excellence of individuals stems from the aim of the paper, namely, to address the tension between nurturing individuals with excellent abilities and promoting the education of those less advantaged. Doing so requires examining the value of developing the excellent abilities of high-achieving students.

²² Terzi, “On Educational Excellence”; Allen, *Education and Equality*; and Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 167. Although students with high cognitive abilities tend to perform well across different areas of academic abilities. See Deary et al., “Intelligence and Educational Achievement.” Our interest lies in excellence with respect to a plurality of abilities (including artistic and athletic), which makes it more likely that different students may excel in different things. Ultimately then, students with excellent abilities are not a homogeneous and distinct social group.

²³ See, for example, Korsgaard, “Two Distinctions in Goodness”; and Anderson, “Value in Ethics and Economics.”

enjoyment is instrumentally valuable. For the sake of our discussion, however, the choice of terms is unimportant. My task is to think clearly about the different ways in which developing abilities is good (and for whom) and to examine whether this value may justify prioritizing developing excellent abilities compared to fostering abilities at other levels. To forward this aim, we need not commit to specific classifications of types of value as long as we provide a precise characterization of each of the ways in which excellence is valuable.

Human abilities, widely understood, are a means to pursue all life plans and human endeavors. As such, schooling that develops abilities has value for the individuals educated because they lead to vocational and financial benefits. Excellent abilities generate especially high value for individuals since they open up a wide range of valuable options—opportunities for higher education, high-paying and meaningful jobs, and more.

While nurturing excellent abilities is indeed extremely valuable for the individuals who have them, the same kind of value is also created through developing the ability of students who are less able. Nurturing those who currently demonstrate low abilities and improving their abilities (especially abilities that are valued in the employment market) can create access to a wider range of jobs and ensure that individuals are more financially independent and able to lead more autonomous lives.

What about the value that society derives from developing excellent abilities? Society benefits from people developing high abilities because their exercise leads to advancement in science, culture, and human thought. The outstanding human achievements that result from the exercise of high abilities (in health care, transportation, and communications, for example) improve the well-being of all members of society, including those least able. Impeding the development of excellent abilities by divesting in programs that nurture them therefore might result in the loss of these valuable things. This value, one might argue, does not have a counterpart at the lower levels of ability because developing excellence involves pushing humanity forward in ways that would be impossible for those with lesser capabilities.

While I do not dispute the unique role of people with high abilities in advancing humankind or that their contribution is a good reason (probably the best reason) to invest in nurturing excellence, I insist that developing basic and intermediate abilities is also extremely instrumentally beneficial for society.²⁴ And despite some differences that will be described, this value, as well as the domains in which it is expressed, is of the same nature as the value of developing excellent abilities.

²⁴ Harel Ben Shahar, “Distributive Justice in Education and Conflicting Interests.”

Advancing the abilities of those at the lower part of the ability spectrum benefits society since it significantly reduces expenditure on welfare, crime and law enforcement, as well as health care for a range of health conditions that are associated with poverty and lack of education, such as diabetes and substance abuse. The resources society currently invests in remedying these social (and medical) ills could instead be directed to other endeavors that improve the wellbeing of all members of society, such as ensuring access to quality and advanced health care, funding scientific research, supporting culture, and more. Cultivating abilities at the low and middle ranges also has a direct positive effect on other members of society, including those with high ability. Crime and other social problems affect not only the least well-off but also other members of society who might be victims of these crimes or of public health problems characteristic of poor and uneducated population.

So increasing longevity, improving public health, and vitalizing scientific research are the kinds of social benefits that can be gained by developing the ability of those at the lower end of the ability spectrum. These are of course the same benefits society gains by nurturing excellent abilities, as discussed above. The difference between advancing abilities at various levels then is not the *kind* of value created nor the *domains* in which this value may be manifested (health, science, culture, and more). Rather, the difference lies in the *way* in which abilities translate into social benefits, and these can vary vastly between those with low abilities and those with high abilities, on account of the different circumstances and characteristics of those groups. Developing high ability typically contributes to society by nurturing the people who will lead innovation, whereas developing ability at lower levels can contribute to society by preventing social problems, accommodating growth, and enabling society to invest in promoting well-being and development.

There may also be differences in the *quantity* of value created by developing ability at different levels, but as I will now explain, developing high ability is not always the socially beneficial choice.

Having concluded that developing ability at any level creates the same kind of instrumental value, we are left with questions of proper distribution. How to balance the relative instrumental value of developing ability at different levels depends on the specific circumstances of each case. Sometimes, it may be especially important to invest in developing excellence, such as when there is a shortage in scientists or when society is facing a public health crisis. In other cases, prioritizing low ability may be more socially beneficial, for example, in a society with high illiteracy rates.

Furthermore, perhaps surprisingly, despite the value of developing exceptional abilities described above, developing abilities at the lower end of the

spectrum is often more morally important than developing high ability. First, for the individual developing their ability, it is likely that marginal utility diminishes with regard to abilities in education, meaning that basic skills such as reading, writing, and basic arithmetic bring larger gains to people who develop them than do more advanced abilities. Acquiring these basic skills is especially beneficial because they are preconditions to more human activities and projects than extremely advanced skills. For example, while mastering high-level calculus is instrumental for certain occupations and projects, there are almost no human projects in modern society that do not necessitate reading and performing basic mathematical actions. As a result, the instrumental benefits we gain from basic skills are greater than those we derive from high-level skills, and similar resources are likely to bring higher returns when invested in developing those with lower ability.

Admittedly, there may be cases in which a small improvement for individuals with especially low abilities requires huge investment of resources or cases in which gains at the top levels of ability generate especially high gains, such as abilities needed for deciphering the human genome. Also, benefits may follow nonlinear patterns so that the gains do not neatly correlate with different levels of ability. The examination of gains and costs would therefore have to be performed at a high level of specificity.

To make things even more complicated, developing excellence is an insatiable goal. While the minimal abilities needed for successfully joining the workforce or for accessing higher education can be determined quite specifically (depending on specific job requirements, admission policies, etc.), developing excellence is more elusive. Even the highest ability can be further improved, so excellence defies attempts to define its end, and there is no such thing as “sufficient” investment in it. As a result, the demands of excellence on the limited resources available to education may be endless, whereas above a certain threshold of ability, the gains from further improvement may not rise proportionately.

In terms of social benefits, uncertainty exists with regard to the *exercise* of developed abilities. People may develop abilities but fail to exercise them (for various reasons including personal and motivational), and the social benefit from their development may ultimately come to nothing. When comparing instrumental gains and costs, we have to keep in mind that developing ability does not guarantee that the expected value will be realized through its exercise. While uncertainty qualifies discussion of potential costs and gains of developing any kind of ability, I think it is especially hard to predict the outcomes of developing excellent abilities. Mundane abilities can (and must) be exercised in a wide range of activities and occupations. Conversely, only one in so many

people who develop excellent ability actually achieves the kind of feats that make high ability so instrumentally valuable for society—such as finding a cure for cancer or writing a literary masterpiece. Others will develop excellent ability but fail to create extraordinary social value. They may utilize their abilities to their private benefit alone. They may also fail to make these contributions because producing works of genius takes more than high ability (requiring creativity, time, effort, and luck). Unfortunately, we cannot tell in advance who will produce these excellent achievements. Maximizing abilities would perhaps be the best strategy to cope with this problem, assuming that only some of those who develop their ability will in fact “deliver” on their promise. However, given limited resources and the mutually exclusive needs of different students, this is impossible, so the uncertainty must be calculated into the value that society gains from developing these exceptional abilities.

But a utilitarian calculation of costs and gains is only part of the input required for calculating vocational and financial value. Weighing the value of ability as a means to other ends is also subject to moral constraints. Thus the equal moral status of individuals would prevent following utilitarian considerations if those imply depriving an individual of a fundamental human right. For example, we might think that we should not give absolute priority to the disadvantaged if it meant denying free education to advantaged students. Moreover, principles of justice will affect how we weigh the different benefits gained. Those committed to a sufficientarian principle of educational justice, for example, assign more moral weight to developing abilities below the adequacy threshold, even when those create the same benefits as abilities above the threshold. Since most theories of justice prioritize the worst-off in some way, improvements on the lower side of the ability scale would usually end up being more morally important, all things considered, than those at the top end of the distribution.

3. THE VALUE OF HIGH ABILITY AS AN END IN ITSELF

When people talk of education (and other things too) as having intrinsic value, what they often mean is that developing ability has value as an end in itself.²⁵ Possessing high ability seems to make one’s life better simply in virtue of having it, even if it has no beneficial effect in terms of access to employment and even when life might be happier or easier if one did *not* possess excellent abilities.

²⁵ Korsgaard discusses the term “intrinsic value” and argues two separate distinctions should be drawn: between instrumental (as a means) and final (as an end), and between intrinsic (value within the object) and extrinsic (value related to something else). See Korsgaard, “Two Distinctions in Goodness.” See also Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics*, 3.

For example, in *How Not to Be a Hypocrite*, Adam Swift states, “It matters to me that my children grow up to be able to appreciate—I mean really appreciate—Shakespeare. It matters because, other things equal, I think people who can appreciate Shakespeare live more fulfilling lives than those who can’t.”²⁶ In other words, even if appreciating Shakespeare is not a means to anything else and if one’s life is just as enjoyable without it, life is made better by being able to appreciate Shakespeare.²⁷

George Sher describes the intrinsic value of gaining a “wide and deep knowledge of the world, and of one’s place in it” and how lives are made better by having “scientific, historical, and social insight.”²⁸ Developing rationality and human capabilities in general can also be thought of as valuable in this way, above and beyond the instrumental benefits they may generate.²⁹

Admittedly, the value of developing ability is derivative of the value of possessing this ability, since it is usually impossible to have a certain ability without going through the process of procuring it. However, the process of *developing* ability through intellectually stimulating and challenging learning is itself valuable as an end.³⁰ Overcoming intellectual challenges, solving puzzles, and discovering new things bring about intellectual pleasure and a sense of worth and fulfillment, which is why even disregarding the possibility that abilities may help realize other ends, they are of value. This also explains why unexercised abilities can be valuable to those who develop them. They can become a part of people’s identity, thereby enriching their lives, and they can contribute to one’s self esteem and sense of achievement.³¹ Developing high ability therefore is valuable for the individual possessing it, not merely as a means to some other end but also as an end in itself.

The end value of developing ability, I argue, is created at all levels of ability, from the very highest to the lowest. Developing excellent ability does not differ in kind from value created by developing other levels of ability. It is valuable to develop the high ability needed to “really” appreciate Shakespeare, but it is also valuable in the same way to develop ability sufficient to appreciate other,

²⁶ Swift, *How Not to Be a Hypocrite*, 26.

²⁷ I think that the most plausible interpretation of Swift is that appreciating Shakespeare makes a life better, not more pleasurable. Other actions might generate comparable enjoyment, but that enjoyment would be less valuable than appreciating Shakespeare.

²⁸ Sher, *Beyond Neutrality*, 121. See also Hurka, *Perfectionism*; Kramer, *Liberalism with Excellence*; and Sypnowich, *Equality Renewed*.

²⁹ Hurka, *Perfectionism*; and Sher, *Beyond Neutrality*.

³⁰ Merry, “Educational Justice and the Gifted.”

³¹ Harel Ben Shahar, “Distributive Justice in Education and Conflicting Interests”; and Robb, “Talent Dispositionalism.”

less demanding forms of literature. Gaining any understanding of the world we live in, rather than the deepest understanding of it, to give another example, is valuable as an end and makes people's lives better, other things being equal, than lives in which they have no such understanding. This, I think, is true even in cases of singular abilities such as those of medalist athletes or musical prodigies. The development of excellence at those heights becomes one of the most defining parts of the athlete's or musician's identity and is tightly linked to their self-worth and sense of accomplishment. This same kind of value (albeit perhaps weaker) is generated in cases of amateur marathonists, for example, who gain a sense of accomplishment and empowerment from meeting self-set goals such as improving their time or extending the distance of their run. Running becomes a part of who they are and how they define and present themselves to others.

In other words, as several perfectionist philosophers stress, placing value on developing human capabilities (as an end in itself) does not necessarily entail elitism.³² Thomas Hurka, for example, states that the perfectionist good of rationality can be performed either at a theoretical level or at a practical level.³³ Therefore, it is not only the philosopher that can live a good life according to the perfectionist standard but also the shopkeeper who is required to make innumerable decisions based on rational deliberation. Realizing one's rational capacity, according to Hurka's account of perfectionism, does not necessarily entail maximizing cognitive ability but rather developing the ability to lead one's life on the basis of rational decision-making. In fact, the value of leading rational lives as an end in itself can actually have an egalitarian pull because it grounds a claim for enabling as many people as possible to develop their capacity for rationality rather than investing in those who are already able to practice rationality but who can nonetheless develop their rational abilities further.³⁴

As described regarding ability as a means to other ends, circumstances affect *how much* noninstrumental value is generated from developing ability. People may have different ends, different levels of awareness of their abilities, and different attachment to them. Sometimes when people have exceptionally high ability in a certain domain, it becomes especially important to them, so improving it is extremely valuable. On the other hand, there may be cases when small improvements at the very bottom range of ability make a big difference by introducing people to new areas of interest that significantly enrich their lives and become a part of their identity. This raises complicated questions of

³² Arneson, "Perfectionism and Politics."

³³ Hurka, *Perfectionism*.

³⁴ Arneson, "Perfectionism and Politics"; Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*; Sypnowich, "A New Approach to Equality"; and Campbell, Nyholm, and Walter, "Disability and the Goods of Life."

quantification, which I will say more about in section 4. The important point for now is that the *kind* of end value created by developing excellence does not differ from that created by developing ability in general. If so, any intuition we might have that suggests that it is especially wasteful to not develop excellent abilities (and therefore that education policy should be designed to ensure their development) is misguided.

Can excellence bring about end value for others as well as for the individual possessing it? David Cooper answers in the affirmative, arguing that when “some scale the heights,” unique value is created for those who observe it, regardless of any other benefit it may create. We should not, he argues, be concerned in the same way for a “general, marginal improvement in the amateur playing of string quartets, or at the times clocked by run-of-the-mill club runners; but [in] seeing the highest standards of musicianship maintained and advanced, with seeing great athletes break new barriers.”³⁵

Notice however, that what creates enjoyment and appreciation for others is the *exercise* of excellent abilities and not their development or existence *per se*. Possessing excellent ability is a precondition for creating great works of art, literature and science, which are valuable for individuals who derive pleasure and appreciation from them. But developing or possessing excellent ability, as opposed to exercising it, does not seem to have final value for anyone except the person possessing it. Think of an extremely gifted painter who irrationally believes that he is obligated to never create a single work of art. It seems unlikely that an ability unpracticed, or practiced only in private, is still valuable for others.³⁶

35 Cooper, *Illusions of Equality*, 55. Not any capability developed creates value. As Lorella Terzi points out, the notion of excellence relates to our theory of good, so perfecting abilities that are unvaluable (such as the ability to count grass blades) or have social disvalue (such as the ability to plan and execute perfect crimes) does not bear intrinsic value. Terzi, “On Educational Excellence,” 96.

36 Korsgaard offers a similar example concerning a beautiful painting that is locked up permanently in a closet, arguing that the good is conditional on someone seeing it. See Korsgaard, “Two Distinctions in Goodness,” 196. Note that the distinction between having an ability and exercising it, which is quite powerful regarding musical, athletic, or artistic abilities, is harder to sustain when we think of cognitive abilities such as contemplation, critical reasoning, or understanding. These abilities are exercised all the time through spontaneous reactions to stimuli in our surrounding world, and they generate end value for individuals possessing them. Enjoyment of other people’s excellent cognitive abilities usually does not occur spontaneously but rather in response to accomplishments such as books or inventions that more obviously require diligence and hard work.

4. THE INTRINSIC VALUE OF EXCELLENT ABILITY

Though there may be various possible ways to understand the term “intrinsic value,” I refer to it here in the following sense: when an object has intrinsic value, it means that its goodness lies in its properties and does not depend on it being good for anyone.³⁷ This type of value is harder to grasp but has been alluded to, for example, in order to ground the value of nature independently of its value for humans.³⁸ In his canonical work on value, Moore suggested that things have intrinsic value when they are valuable “in isolation”—namely, if they are good even if nothing else exists at all.³⁹

Excellent human ability can be good in such an impersonal sense: not good for anybody in particular but in the abstract. Excellent athletic abilities, musical abilities, or mathematical genius can be valuable *simpliciter* in the same way we think that beauty or nature is good: valuable not because of the pleasure or increase in well-being that it brings to a specific agent but because some things, excellent things especially, are good in themselves.

Not all philosophers endorse the concept of impersonal value, and those who do disagree upon the specific goods that have such intrinsic value. But assuming we ascribe intrinsic value to human abilities, this does not yet entail that only high abilities have intrinsic value. When we value nature—a tree, for example—it would be odd to ascribe value only to the tallest tree, the greenest one, or the one that yields the most fruit. True, it is reasonable to value the Great Barrier Reef more highly than just any random part of the ocean, but the difference between the two is vested in *how much* we value them rather than in the kind of value they have. The entire ocean is arguably still valuable in and of itself, so it would be worthy of protection and sustaining, even if there were no humans around to appreciate it. Similarly, the most persuasive version of the view that attributes intrinsic value to human capabilities involves ascribing such value to abilities of any level. Kant’s approach toward intrinsic value demonstrates this. “The good will,” understood as the practice of fully rational choices, is the only thing intrinsically valuable according to Kant.⁴⁰ Rational choices, however, are made by people with a range of abilities rather than only by people with the highest rationality.⁴¹

³⁷ Korsgaard, “Two Distinctions in Goodness”; Green, “Two Distinctions in Environmental Goodness”; and Langton, “Objective and Unconditioned Value.”

³⁸ Green, “Two Distinctions in Environmental Goodness.”

³⁹ Moore, “The Conception of Intrinsic Value.”

⁴⁰ For a discussion of this, see Korsgaard, “Two Distinctions in Goodness.”

⁴¹ Hurka, *Perfectionism*.

5. THE VALUE OF INSPIRATION

There is an aspect of the noninstrumental value of developing excellence that seems unique to developing excellence (rather than any ability)—namely, the value of inspiration. Yet as I soon demonstrate, even inspiration is not unique to excellent ability.

Extraordinary human abilities inspire people. They set an example for the unlimitedness of human spirit, they ignite the imagination, they move and motivate us, and they can even create a sense of community and solidarity between the people sharing the experience. Feeling awe when observing outstanding abilities is a valuable human experience that can enrich our lives, even if it has no further specific beneficial consequences. Noticing the special value of excellent feats, Matthew Kramer goes as far as to argue that “the excellence of the society through its furtherance of sterling accomplishments will heighten the level of self-respect which each of its members is warranted in experiencing.”⁴² People belonging to a society that creates such excellence feel warranted self-respect, and this, according to Kramer, justifies governmental support of actions needed to foster outstanding achievements.

Although I consider inspiration to be valuable as an end in itself, it can also have instrumental value because it motivates people to excel and to persevere in the face of difficulty (but this would be considered together with other instrumental benefits of developing excellence). Note that inspiration is a reaction to excellent achievements (or the exercise of abilities) but also directly to the *development* of extraordinary abilities, since the effort and talent involved in developing outstanding abilities is itself subject to admiration.

At first brush, it might seem that inspiration is elicited only when people scale the heights, and as such, it provides at least one sense in which excellent abilities are uniquely valuable. Upon closer examination, however, the value of inspiration is also, I argue, not reserved solely for excellent abilities. It is warranted not only when abilities are high in absolute terms but also when abilities are *comparatively* high. In a neighborhood basketball scene, for example, a local hero can elicit inspiration even if her abilities are only exceptional compared to her amateur friends. Even in an imaginary dystopian scenario in which human excellence dwindles significantly (due to denying resources to the brightest, for example), the good of admiration could still exist. It would simply be directed toward relatively outstanding abilities instead of toward excellent abilities according to an absolute scale.

⁴² Kramer, *Liberalism with Excellence*, 36.

Further, we are also inspired when confronted with people who succeed in developing abilities against all odds, even if the ensuing abilities are not excellent in absolute terms. For example, the achievements of Paralympic athletes may fall short of the highest possible human abilities in absolute measures of speed or height, but the abilities developed and demonstrated warrant awe equal to or indeed greater than the excellent abilities developed by athletes without disabilities.⁴³

We might, however, be able to distinguish between two different types of inspiration: one is the response to effort, grit, and perseverance, whether or not the outcome is objectively excellent; the other is the awe we feel when we behold outstanding accomplishments. This second kind of emotional reaction is unrelated to the effort invested in it, much like the emotional response we might experience when we see a beautiful landscape, sunset, or butterfly. Indeed, I concede that when we see magnificent works of art or listen to a divine masterpiece, we may experience a strong emotional reaction simply in virtue of the beauty of what we are witnessing. But I think that even in these cases, awe is related to the ability needed to make such a perfect creation. If the subject of our admiration were easily accomplished, I suspect it would not elicit the same emotional reaction.

As a result, I contend that even the value of inspiration can be gained in response to abilities across the board. If all of the above is persuasive, then the value of developing excellent ability is not of a unique kind, and whatever value it has is created also (to varying degrees) by developing ability at all levels. It follows then that education policy, including resource allocation, pedagogy, student assignment, and other issues, should be determined by weighing the value and disvalue created by alternative possible educational policies.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Developing abilities is extremely valuable for the individuals possessing them, for others, and even in impersonal and intrinsic ways that do not depend on the abilities being good for anyone in particular. The discussion above was an exploratory one, aiming to understand the different value that is created by developing human ability and specifically to determine whether developing excellence involves the creation of special value that is not created in developing ability at other levels—low ability, average ability, and even high (but

⁴³ Notably, however, writers and activists in the disabilities movement have referred critically to the fact that people with disabilities are often regarded as “inspiring” for doing the most ordinary things such as working, getting married, raising children. See, for example, Grue, “The Problem with Inspiration Porn.”

not quite excellent) ability. This examination revealed that although we might intuitively think that developing excellence is valuable in a way that developing other types of ability is not, this is actually not the case: the differences between developing ability at different levels are vested not in the *kind* of value derived but in *how much* value is created in each case.

Where does this leave us in terms of the distributive dilemma that motivated the paper? Namely, assuming that excellence is not valuable in unique ways, how should we address educational dilemmas that involve tension between developing excellence and developing ability at lower levels? Should we invest scarce resources in programs for gifted children or in funding educational aides for students with low abilities? Should teachers choose materials that will challenge high achievers if students with average or low abilities would gain more from other curricular choices? And should we allow ability grouping even though it is not the most desirable assignment policy for children with low abilities, if it will push forward the very best students?

Balancing the expected gains and costs of educational options according to their effect on all levels of ability is a complicated task—empirically and normatively—that cannot be performed properly here. I will, however, venture to provide some guiding comments that can be gleaned from the discussion above.

Evaluating the relative weight of ability's value involves two separate questions. The first concerns value of the same kind, for example, figuring out whether one policy is more instrumentally valuable than another. The second must factor in different kinds of value for a comprehensive evaluation of educational options. The first issue is theoretically less difficult but involves taking into consideration a lot of information that is not always available. For example, it would matter how financially rewarding it is to develop high abilities in a certain society; what ends specific people have and what abilities are needed to pursue them; whether there are alternative pathways (apart from schools) to developing certain abilities; how many people in society have the potential to develop specific abilities and how many people with those abilities are needed for society to prosper; how many people in society have substandard abilities and what the social costs of that reality are; whether specific individuals have one or more excellent abilities; how costly it is to develop (excellent and low) abilities; and more.

Since these considerations and many more should be factored in each case, designing simple and conclusive guidelines for decision-making is impossible, even with regard to the first challenge—evaluating value of the same kind. The most promising way forward is through empirically informed philosophical discussion of specific educational practices. Philosophers of education

engage in this important work routinely, and the observations made in this paper accentuate the importance of continuing this line of research. The analysis here contributes to such projects by clarifying the various aspects of value that excellence and ability in general have and prompting those who take part in these debates to give excellence its due weight.

The second challenge, namely how to provide an integrated assessment of different and incommensurable kinds of value, is theoretically more complicated. But it is also, I argue, more pressing in theory than in practice. For the sake of real-life decision-making, we should usually give predominant weight to the instrumental value of developing ability. Other types of value, including end value, intrinsic value, and the value of inspiration, are insignificant except in special cases, as we will see shortly.

The different types of value attached to developing ability are typically created simultaneously. Individuals seldom gain one without the other. The instrumental financial and vocational benefits of developing (both high and low) ability have a tangible effect on people's well-being. They enable people to become independent and live autonomous lives; they improve people's chances of pursuing higher education and having interesting and meaningful occupations instead of working in menial, boring, and demeaning jobs or perhaps even being involved in crime. By developing abilities, society gains productive citizens and reduces costs associated with poverty and crime. Likewise, the instrumental benefits society gains from developing the abilities of high achievers are also concrete: inventions lead to improvements in life expectancy, health, and economic growth, potentially improving well-being for many individuals.

As opposed to the palpable benefits described above, the value of developing ability as an end in itself is quite amorphous. We value our abilities as an end in themselves, meaning that our lives are better with them. But the non-instrumental gains are secondary compared to the instrumental benefits that permeate every single aspect of our lives. In the balance between obtaining the concrete gains that developing ability has to offer on the one hand and the value of "really appreciating Shakespeare" on the other, one might reasonably prioritize the former. The same, I argue, can be argued for intrinsic value and the value of inspiration. While we may accept that developing ability is intrinsically valuable and may inspire others, neither seems as morally urgent or weighty as some of the more practical instrumental aspects of developing ability.

Luckily, when abilities are developed, both kinds of value are created. So while the moral importance of developing ability is vested primarily in the instrumental benefits it generates, noninstrumental value is created at the same time and spread (even if unequally) across the whole spectrum.

The upshot is that ethical consideration of educational policy-making should focus predominantly on the instrumental value of developing ability. Considering intrinsic value may be appropriate, however, in special cases when it provides an important and unique consideration. For example, fostering a disabled person's artistic abilities could be very valuable for that individual as an end in itself even if it does not create any vocational or financial gains (or even if it does not make that person happy) given how it can fill their lives with meaning. Still, instrumental value typically provides policymakers with the most morally significant information and should therefore be at the center of decision-making processes.

Developing students' abilities, ideally to their maximal potential, is one of the goals of education. Surely, many educational practices are able to attend to the needs of students with high and low ability alike, and efforts should be directed to develop and implement pedagogies that make this possible. Additionally, sufficient educational resources should ideally be directed to multiple ends, meeting the needs of children with diverse needs and abilities. Still, in many cases, distributing resources and designing educational policy entail prioritizing either the development of basic competencies or the development of excellent ones. Clarifying the value of excellence helps us to strike a balance between these competing aims and to accord excellence its appropriate moral weight.⁴⁴

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