

A Fundamental Challenge?

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Here is a quick recipe for creating an educational truism: first, choose a complex and prevailing social problem; next, propose that this problem can be solved through a curriculum or educational practice which directly addresses it; lastly, as a final touch, emphasize the moral urgency of adopting the curriculum or practice by evoking frightful images that capture the consequences of inaction. A casual reader of Sockett's essay might conclude his argument is an educational truism. *The complex and prevailing social problem* is a society's unjust distribution of resources caused by self-interested competition in the labor market and schools. *The solution* is the incorporation of altruistic discussion in the classroom, where students learn to engage in procedures of rational deliberation about what they owe others for the purpose of cultivating altruistic motivations to guide their actions later in life. So, if the inequitable distribution of resources caused by thoughtless, self-interested competition (inside and outside of schools) is the problem; thoughtful altruistic discussion within schools is the solution. In an attempt to identify the final touch, i.e., the dramatic emphasis of the harm that will befall us if we do not act accordingly, it becomes clear that a casual reading of Sockett's essay will not suffice, because he is not offering us an educational truism.

The key to a more careful reading of Sockett's essay can be found in what the essay assumes without argument, namely, "Searching for positional goods through education is a necessary, not a contingent feature of a democratic capitalist society, justified by the principle of freedom." Let's take a moment to define the assumption's terms. The term positional good can be defined in a number of ways, but for the purposes of this essay we can follow philosopher Christopher Freiman's definition and say, "a good is positional when its value to its possessor is determined by the possessor's relative position in the good's distribution."¹ The term positional good, so defined, need not be restricted to

one kind of pursuit. A person might seek to become the top knitter (in relation to others in the knitting circle), or, to quote Martin Luther King's sermon, be recognized by others as a "drum major for justice." I take it that Sockett's use of "positional goods" is mainly confined to competition in the labor market for prestigious and lucrative positions and the antecedent competitions occurring within schools which sort and screen students for "real world" competitions. What is meant by the principle of freedom in this context? I understand it as follows: If, in a democratic capitalist society, A restricted B from educational/economic competition, or never exposed B to its necessity, it would be a violation of this B's liberty, both in the sense of B's negative liberty to compete on a level playing field, without interference, and B's positive liberty to become a successful competitor. So, according to the assumption grounding Sockett's argument for altruism in schools, the principle of freedom provides moral justification for the necessity of self-interested educational/economic competition in our current social order.

This assumption means Sockett is not advancing an educational truism. He is not simply prescribing the opposite of the problem (say, altruism as an antidote for egoism), because he understands the problem to be necessary and morally justifiable: "... the *fundamental challenge* for the educator," as he writes, "is to accept the legitimacy of student and parent motivation for positional goods but simultaneously bring strong social benefits within the educator's intentions and outcomes." Given Sockett's accommodation of the problem, there need not be ominous remarks about what will happen if altruistic deliberation does not occur. The problem is not all that bad, and the solution is not so dissimilar from the problem. Although Sockett claims later that, "Altruism directly contrasts with the individual egoism of the search for positional goods," the contrast is not terribly sharp in his argument. Expressed as a recipe, we might say his argument proceeds as follows: First, assume the necessity and moral legitimacy of the problem (i.e., unjust distribution of resources caused by self-interested competition); next, stir in a modest educational solution which is compatible with the problem (i.e., a sober altruistic deliberation which entertains mixed motives and utilitarian calculation about what students owe others). Add an

appeal to the importance of “community” and “collective ethical beliefs.” And blend *thoroughly*.

While this is not an educational truism, I find Sockett’s argument unpersuasive for the following reasons. To start, I worry that Sockett’s solution, altruistic deliberation in classrooms, is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for solving the problem which motivates his argument, specifically, the unjust distribution of resources. That goods or educational opportunities are distributed in a way that is “random,” “uncertain,” and a matter of “luck” is a problem that must be solved at a policy level—and—ultimately, by changing what Rawls called the “basic structure” of a society. Widespread and consistent altruistic deliberations within classrooms may facilitate systemic changes, sure, but alone, they would be insufficient for correcting this problem of distributive justice. Moreover, were these systemic changes to take place, and the injustices of our social order corrected, it is unclear why (on Sockett’s own terms) altruistic deliberation would be necessary. If a society’s basic structure were just, competitors could seek self-interested advancement and their efforts would yield social benefits despite their intentions. So, I worry that cultivating altruistic motivations in classrooms is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition for correcting the problem of distributive justice which Sockett uses to motivate his argument.

Assuming that Sockett’s prescription is more modest and altruistic deliberation merely sets students in the *direction* of needed social change, a second shortcoming of Sockett’s argument is that he does not identify the social conditions for effective altruistic deliberation. Altruistic deliberation, in his essay, takes place in a generalized classroom, where generalized students adhere to Anglo-American conversational norms as they assess global and local problems related to “altruistic desert.” However, given the historic and present reality of racially segregated schools in the US, and the fact that economic segregation is a rising trend, it is not difficult to envision widespread discussions on “altruistic desert” occurring in a manner that would be systemically harmful.² What, in Sockett’s argument, is to stop the most advantaged citizens to conclude that they owe nothing to abstract poor people, near and far? Or, less cynically, what is to stop them from incorrectly reasoning from another’s perspective? In other

words, without attention to the social conditions of effective altruistic deliberation and the value of first-person testimony in integrated public settings (a topic which philosophers like Elizabeth Anderson have considered at length), it's easy to imagine that altruistic deliberations could provide just another opportunity for advantaged students to effectively rationalize away their complicity in passive injustice.

My final concern relates to the assumption that motivates Sockett's fundamental challenge. If we can imagine socially beneficial change occurring according to the most charitable reading of Sockett's argument, can't we also imagine the *freedom* to engage in high-stakes/zero-sum competitions to be an unnecessary and contingent feature of social life? Sockett's essay bids us to consider a prosocial community in schools, but simultaneously warns us against imagining a social order where we lack the freedom to succeed in a manner which disadvantages others. By analogy, this is like beginning an argument on the value of environmental education by assuming that pollution in an industrial society is necessary (which may be true, to some extent) & (the kicker) that it's also morally justifiable. Just as it would be strange to provide children with an environmental education which instils a moral justification for pollution; wouldn't it also be wrongheaded to teach the value of altruism and/or deliberative democracy in a way which, explicitly or implicitly, inculcates a moral justification for using one's talents in a manner which, by necessity, sorely disadvantages others?

Following the recent work of Akeel Bilgrami, I'm inclined to see this moral justification for disadvantaging others as deeply mixed up, and, more dramatically, as a recipe for legitimizing alienation in social life.³ The efforts of students and parents who rabidly quest after positional goods are not morally legitimate, nor especially is the educational market which thrives by exploiting parents' fears about their children falling behind.⁴ Why? Because such actions perpetuate and reproduce alienation in social life and turn schools and universities into antisocial environments. Like a corporation's disregard for pollution, rabid efforts to get ahead of others in educational and economic races work powerfully to abet and intensify the malaise affecting social life (visible in both ghettos and gated communities, failing schools and Ivy League dorms). Rather

than endowing harmful, high stakes, zero-sum competitions with moral justification, I think the more fundamental challenge, again following Bilgrami, is to teach students and ourselves to understand why: “*nobody in society is well off if someone is badly off*”—or, as a corollary, why the rabid quest after the positional goods that Sockett has in mind is harmful for both the winners *and* the losers, and is therefore not morally justifiable.⁵ More could be said. For now, the point is this, if this more ambitious principle cannot be taught in schools because it violates the “principle of freedom” in a “democratic capitalist society”—I worry that the fundamental challenge Sockett’s essay asks us to take-up forces us to put freedom and equality in an irresolvable dilemma. If we need not do this, if the individual’s good can be defined socially, and we can affirm without excessive qualification that “*nobody in a society is well off if someone is badly off*”—then, perhaps, we’ll find a more compelling basis upon which to advance the socially transformative value of altruistic discussion in schools.

1 Christopher Frieman, “Priority and Position,” *Philosophical Studies* 167, no. 2 (2014): 341-360.

2 See the recent work done by journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones and Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016).

3 Akeel Bilgrami, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

4 Daniel Halliday, “Private Education, Positional Goods, and the Arms Race Problem,” *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 15, no. 2 (2016): 150-169.

5 Bilgrami, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment*, 165.