

Priority and position

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Abstract Positional goods are goods whose relative amount determines their absolute value. Many goods appear to have positional aspects. For example, one’s relative standing in the distribution of education and wealth may determine one’s absolute condition with respect to goods like employment opportunities, self-respect, and social inclusion. Positional goods feature in recent arguments from T.M. Scanlon, Brian Barry, and Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift that assert that we should favor egalitarian distributions of positional goods even if we reject equality as a fundamental principle of distributive justice. With respect to positional goods, worsening the better off is required to better the worse off. Thus, we have reason to “level down” goods such as education and wealth in order to benefit those worse off with respect to the value of those goods. I argue that the allegedly positional aspects of the goods in question are not actually positional. Moreover, leveling down these goods risks self-defeat: it may produce a net decrease in the value of the shares of individuals with less of such goods. If so, leveling down measures would fail on their own terms.

Keywords Positional goods · Distributive Justice · Egalitarianism · Prioritarianism

Maria Callas demanded that any opera house in which she performed pay her one dollar more than the company’s second highest paid singer.¹ Callas clearly cared a

¹ This story is reported in Pinker (1999, p. 390).

great deal about her relative standing within the opera community. We can assume other singers did too.

It's good to find win–win resolutions to these sorts of conflicts, but there is not one here. Callas has to drop down a rung for someone else to rise; she must lose standing for her rivals to gain standing. Insofar as we're inclined to favor the interests of the worse off, we have no choice but to worsen the better off in cases like these. These cases are special because they concern *positional goods*, that is, goods whose relative amount determines their absolute value.

Positional goods figure in a recent, and much discussed, argument that promises to deliver substantive egalitarian conclusions from strictly prioritarian premises. Prioritarianism claims that benefiting the worse off has moral priority over benefiting the better off.² Some favor prioritarianism over egalitarianism because it focuses on improving the absolute welfare of the disadvantaged rather than equalizing relative levels of welfare. One worry about egalitarianism is that it recommends “leveling down”: insofar as justice demands equality, we have reason to favor policy that worsens the better off and betters none.³

But with respect to positional goods, worsening the better off is required to better the worse off. So leveling down positional goods can be justified on prioritarian grounds. Thus, the positional goods argument yields egalitarian conclusions without starting from egalitarian premises. Latent forms of this argument are offered by Brian Barry and T.M. Scanlon, and Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift have recently advanced a powerful constellation of egalitarian arguments based expressly on the prioritarian rationale for leveling down positional goods.⁴ Prioritarianism may recommend leveling down a large number of apparently positional goods including health, wealth, and education.⁵ Although not purely positional, these goods may have positional *aspects*. According to this argument, one's relative standing in the distribution of health, wealth, and education determines one's absolute condition with respect to goods like employment opportunities, self-respect, and social inclusion.

Recent philosophical work on positional goods is commendable not least for bringing a topic that has received much attention in the social sciences to bear on matters of distributive justice. Theorists like Barry, Brighouse and Swift, and Scanlon are taking egalitarianism to promising new places. Their illuminating and innovative work underwrites what I take to be the strongest account of egalitarianism on offer. Those of us who follow Scanlon in the thought that the most powerful reasons for favoring equality “can be traced back to fundamental values other than equality itself” should regard positional goods as *the* reason recommending egalitarian distributions.⁶ One need only assign intrinsic moral

² On prioritarianism, see Parfit (2002), Arneson (2000), Crisp (2003), Temkin (2003).

³ See, for instance, Parfit (2002), Nozick (1974, p. 229), Raz (1986, p. 235).

⁴ Barry (2005), Scanlon (2003), Brighouse and Swift (2006), see also Pogge (2008), Lichtenberg (1996), Hollis (1984).

⁵ Although health is the positional good in question, presumably what is under consideration for “leveling down” is the *means* to health, such as health care, rather than health itself.

⁶ Scanlon (2003, p. 202).

importance to individuals' absolute well-being to recognize a reason to equalize shares of positional goods.⁷ Thus, positional goods ought to occupy the attention of even non-egalitarian theorists.

In this paper, however, I argue that the allegedly positional aspects of the goods in question are not actually positional. Here is the argument in brief. Because a possessor's relative standing in the distribution of a positional good determines the good's absolute value, growth in the supply of the good cannot produce gains in the good's value for those with less without altering their relative position in the distribution of the good. Yet growth in the supply of goods like education, health, and wealth *can* produce gains in the goods' allegedly positional aspects for those with less without altering their relative position in the distribution of the good. Thus, these aspects are not actually positional. This conclusion, in turn, militates against the claim that we ought to level down the goods in question.

I begin by discussing the nature of positional goods and explain why goods such as education, health, and wealth should not be considered positional when construed as means to goods like employment opportunities, self-respect, or social inclusion (§1–2). I then argue that leveling down the aforementioned goods on prioritarian grounds risks self-defeat: Pareto inefficient distributions of these goods would gradually produce a net *decrease* in the value of the shares held by individuals with less (§3–5). I suggest that the most effective strategy for increasing the value of the worse off's shares of such goods is to expand the supply of the goods. If this is the case, prioritarianism would not recommend leveling them down but rather forbid it. I conclude that my arguments generalize beyond the particular goods I consider in detail and that positional goods do not supply robust reason to level down to achieve egalitarian distributions (§6).

1 Positional goods

Following Brighouse and Swift, we can say that a good is positional when its value to its possessor is determined by the possessor's relative position in the good's distribution.⁸ The only way to increase the value of the shares of a positional good held by those with less is to reduce the shares of those with more. Brighouse and Swift write,

We cannot rely on growth—an increase in the total amount of the good available—to bring about a gradual improvement in the absolute position of the worse off. In these cases, there is no way that inequality could tend to improve the position of the worse off—with regard to the value of the good in question—for the only way to give more to some is to give less to others.⁹

⁷ It is worth noting that a variety of non-prioritarian theories provide grounds for regarding equality as instrumentally valuable. However, I focus on prioritarianism in part because the main arguments for leveling down positional goods tend to make use of prioritarian premises.

⁸ Brighouse and Swift (2006, p. 474).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

Because a positional good's value is determined by its possessor's relative standing, an increase in the total supply of the good cannot improve the condition of the worse off unless it changes their relative position in the good's distribution. Thus, although providing a full-fledged account of positional goods is beyond the scope of this paper, Brighthouse and Swift's remarks suggest a necessary condition:

A good is positional only if an increase in the good's supply cannot increase the value of the good for those with less without altering their relative position in the distribution of the good.

Because I aim only to rule out candidates from the class of positional goods, a necessary condition is enough for present purposes.

Core cases of positional goods illustrate Brighthouse and Swift's claim that there is no way that inequalities in the distribution of positional goods can benefit the worse off. Political power is a stock example.¹⁰ For instance, doubling everyone's differential share of the vote cannot increase the political power of those with fewer votes. We cannot create more political power by printing more ballots or creating more political offices. Assuming new offices exercise genuine power, they do so at the expense of the power exercised by existing offices—or, if they exercise power over a previously ungoverned matter, they do so at the expense of power exercised by citizens themselves. Political power is positional in virtue of being fixed sum. One person's gain is another person's loss.

Starting gates in a race are another example. Starting gates have value as a means of advancing relative position. One racer's improved chance of victory necessarily worsens another's chance of victory; thus there is no way for inequalities to benefit the worse off. If some runners start ahead of others, moving everyone's gate forward to an equal extent does nothing to increase the disadvantaged runners' chances of victory all else equal. A starting gate differs from political power in that it is not itself a fixed-sum good; it is a positional good in virtue of being a *means* to a fixed-sum good, e.g., a gold medal.

Of course, few favor inequalities in goods like political power or starting gates. What is distinctive about recent philosophical accounts of positional goods is their emphasis on the pervasiveness of positional competition. Brighthouse and Swift identify three types of positional goods. Those with clearly competitive dimensions are *manifestly competitive*. Education is a manifestly competitive positional good when construed as a means to employment: the relative quality of one's education determines its competitive value in the labor market.¹¹ "In the job market," Barry writes, "what matters is not how much education you have but how much you have in relation to others."¹²

Health is a *latently competitive* positional good.¹³ Health's competitive dimension is not immediately apparent; nonetheless, relative healthiness, like

¹⁰ See, e.g., Rawls (2005, p. 358), Rawls (2001, p. 150). Even political power may not be a *purely* positional good. See Brighthouse (1997, p. 167).

¹¹ Brighthouse and Swift (2006, p. 478; 2008, p. 450). See also Hollis (1982), Koski and Reich (2006).

¹² Barry (2005, p. 176).

¹³ Brighthouse and Swift (2006, p. 478).

relative education, affects labor market opportunities. If Max is healthier than his competitors, he can work longer and harder than they can. He will, all things equal, outcompete them for a job.

Latently positional goods are goods whose unequal distribution disadvantages those with less independently of any attendant competitive advantages. Wealth may be latently positional: one's relative economic position affects one's achievement of other goods like self-respect and social inclusion. Citizens who possess relatively less wealth may consequently enjoy less self-respect or less access to their society's shared practices.

As Brighthouse and Swift emphasize, our apparent reason to level down these goods “has nothing to do with envy or an irrational preoccupation with relativities or comparisons.”¹⁴ We can arrive at egalitarian conclusions about distributions of positional goods from prioritarian premises that accord moral weight only to individuals' absolute well-being. Prioritarianism holds that a gain is more morally valuable the worse off the recipient of the gain.¹⁵ The only way to give more to those worse off with respect to a positional good is to give less to those better off with respect to the good. Thus, prioritarianism implies a reason to level down positional goods. The gains to the worse off trump the corresponding losses to the better off. Note, then, that if Brighthouse and Swift are right, then leveling down positional goods does not amount to leveling down *welfare*—the welfare of the worse off would be improved. Brighthouse and Swift therefore do not advocate leveling down as it is typically understood, namely equalization that harms some and benefits none. However, I will follow their usage for the purposes of this paper.¹⁶

The prioritarian reason to level down positional goods is defeasible. Concerns that are unrelated to positional competition can override the prioritarian reasons to level down positional goods.¹⁷ For example, goods like education have nonpositional aspects (e.g., personal enrichment) which might countervail the reasons that recommend leveling down. Or, leveling down might decrease the overall well-being of the worse off. However, insofar as our attention is fixed solely on the value of goods' positional aspects, prioritarianism seems to imply straightforwardly that we ought to level down. Thus, we might say that only *education-as-a-means-to-employment-opportunities*—and not education as such—is a positional good that we have reason to level down.

¹⁴ 2006, p. 475. There are egalitarian arguments that contend that a concern for relativities as such is not irrational; however, for the purposes of this paper, I will restrict my focus to those views that do not regard relative standing as morally important in itself.

¹⁵ This feature of prioritarianism explains why it will support leveling down positional goods in a wider range of cases than other theories that regard equality as instrumentally valuable, such as utilitarianism. In a case of leveling down that benefits the worse off to the same extent it harms the better off, a prioritarian would favor leveling down while a utilitarian would be indifferent.

¹⁶ Thanks are due to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to the need to clarify this distinction.

¹⁷ For these reasons, Brighthouse and Swift (2006, p. 483) suggest that inequality might ultimately be acceptable on all things considered prioritarian grounds.

2 Positional goods in principle and in practice

I will argue that goods such as wealth and education lack the positional aspects they are alleged to possess. Before proceeding it will be helpful to draw a distinction between goods that are positional in principle and those that we might regard as positional in practice.

Whether a particular good is positional in principle is a conceptual question. Recalling the condition suggested by Brighthouse and Swift's account, let us say that a good is positional in principle only if it is not possible for increases in the good's supply to produce gains in the value of the good for those with less without altering their relative position in the distribution of the good. A good that is not positional in principle can nevertheless be positional in practice. In these cases, it may be *possible* for increases in the good's supply to produce gains in the value of the good for those with less without altering their relative position in the distribution. However, the ameliorating effects of growth will be too small, or occur too slowly, to improve the position of the worse off in the relevant time horizon. Here we have reason to level down because it's the most effective means of benefiting the worse off for practical purposes. Whether a good is positional in practice is largely a social scientific question.

In what follows, I'll argue that the allegedly positional aspects of the goods discussed earlier are neither positional in principle nor in practice. By showing that goods like wealth and education are not positional goods in principle, we open an interesting philosophical possibility: leveling down the goods in question can be opposed by the very value to which the leveling down argument appeals. As noted earlier, the leveling down argument under consideration does not assert that we should level down education (for example) *all things considered*. Rather, if we are focused solely on the labor market opportunities of the less educated, then we should level down education *nothing else considered*. I will challenge even this more modest claim.¹⁸

Suppose that leveling down education not only adds to the job opportunities of the worse off by increasing their relative educational standing but also subtracts from their opportunities by an even greater amount by decreasing the supply of jobs. To take a simple example, suppose leveling down education in a particular case opened five new job opportunities for the relatively less educated but prevented the creation of six new job opportunities for them. Here leveling down generates a net loss of opportunity for the worse off and thus fails on its own terms. It frustrates the end it is supposed to further. In this case, our alleged (defeasible) reason to level down would not simply be outweighed by separate, competing considerations;

¹⁸ A further possibility for justifying leveling down positional goods is as follows. Leveling down positional goods could be justified all things considered if equality is intrinsically valuable and, further, leveling down brings about gains in equality and benefits to particular members of the worse off class that are sufficiently great such that they outweigh the losses to other members of the worse off class. I will not pursue this argument further because the positional goods argument for leveling down advanced by Brighthouse and Swift and others is intended to work without assuming the intrinsic value of equality. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for suggesting this possibility.

instead, the case for leveling down would be opposed by the very values to which the leveling down arguments themselves appeal.

Even if goods such as education-as-a-means-to-employment opportunities are not positional in principle, they may be positional in practice. However I marshal considerations suggesting that Pareto efficiency and growth will generally be more effective strategies for benefiting the worse off than leveling down in the specific cases considered by advocates of leveling down. Given that this is a work of philosophy and not social science, I won't undertake extensive empirical inquiry into the effects of any particular policy. Since arguments both for and against leveling down in practice hinge on empirical claims, neither side can expect to conclusively establish their case without such an inquiry. My goal here is accordingly modest: to countervail the arguments offered on behalf of leveling down the proposed goods and to shift the burden of proof to advocates of leveling down.

3 Self-respect

Barry, Brighthouse and Swift, and Scanlon share the concern that material inequalities sabotage the worse off's achievement of valuable goods like self-respect and social inclusion.¹⁹ People's self-respect suffers when "they judge their own worth by comparing themselves with others who are better off, in some dimension judged relevant, than themselves."²⁰ Here the relevant dimension of self-respect is roughly one's social standing—that is, one's perceived position along some dimension of interpersonal comparison.²¹ Leveling down wealth improves the relative economic position of the materially worse off and can in turn increase their self-respect by enabling them to make more favorable economic comparisons to others.

3.1 Wealth as a Means to Self-Respect in Principle

It is true by definition that wealth is a positional good in principle as a means to high relative economic position. However, relative economic position is but one contributor to social standing and self-respect. I contend that there are multiple non-overlapping social bases of self-respect; consequently, we can bring about gains in the self-respect of the relatively less wealthy through the proliferation of these social bases of self-respect. Moreover, institutions can foster the proliferation of these new social bases of self-respect by fostering general gains in social wealth. Thus, wealth-as-a-means-to-self-respect is not a positional good in principle.

Philosophers as diverse as Michael Walzer, Robert Nozick, and John Rawls reject the idea that there is a fixed sum of social standing.²² Pluralism about what

¹⁹ See also Lichtenberg (1996).

²⁰ Brighthouse and Swift (2006, p. 490).

²¹ See Barry (2005, pp. 78 and 81).

²² See Walzer (1983), Nozick (1974, p. 245), Rawls (1999, p. 470).

makes lives and projects worthwhile translates into pluralism of standing.²³ Rawls underscores liberal institutions' tendency to generate a "plurality of associations [...] each with its secure internal life [...] The various associations in society tend to divide it into so many noncomparing groups, the discrepancies between these divisions not attracting the kind of attention which unsettles the lives of those less well placed."²⁴ A proliferation of dimensions of social comparison can improve everyone's self-respect if people value the dimensions differently and can participate selectively. Indeed, evidence indicates that we tend to highly value those dimensions in which we perform well.²⁵ Nozick puts it this way:

Everyone might view themselves as at the upper end of a distribution through the perspective of the particular weights he assigns. The fewer the dimensions, the less the opportunity for an individual successfully to use as a basis for self-esteem a nonuniform weighting strategy that gives greater weight to the dimension he scores highly in.²⁶

Conversely, the more dimensions, the greater the opportunity for individuals to successfully use nonuniform weighting strategies as a basis for self-esteem.²⁷

As Rawls's and Nozick's remarks suggest, individuals subscribing to different conceptions of the good will believe that different attributes confer standing differently. Athletes, scholars, entertainers, artists, and executives vie for standing along different dimensions, or at least assign different weights to the dimensions along which they compete. They will rely on distinct, generally esoteric measures of prestige. For a philosopher, standing comes largely from achievements like publishing in well-regarded journals. Winning important cases is vital to the standing of a lawyer. Artists' standing increases with showings in famous galleries. Athletes achieve standing by winning championships and setting records.

Although undoubtedly some dimensions of interpersonal comparison are widely shared, many are not. For the most part, the kinds of people noted above are climbing different ladders. Each probably pays comparatively little attention to many of the measures of prestige valued highly by the others (which is of course not to say that they pay *no* attention). The standing won by a person in one community generally does not impinge on or detract from the standing of a person in another community. Philosophers tend not to gain or lose self-respect by comparing their publication record to those of their counterparts in the medical profession who publish in medical journals. There may be no common frame of reference that enables us to compare the standing of all persons.

Consequently, people care about where they stand along a variety of dimensions of comparison. Our self-respect hinges on our relative position within softball

²³ What matters for "standing pluralism" is not genuine value pluralism but rather *perceived* value pluralism. That is, what matters is that individuals accept a plurality of values (rightly or wrongly) and thus render different evaluations of dimensions of comparison.

²⁴ Rawls (1999, p. 470).

²⁵ See Tesser and Paulhus (1983).

²⁶ Nozick (1974, p. 245).

²⁷ See also Ben-Ze'ev, (1992, p. 580), Lucas (1977, p. 268), Smith, et al. (1990).

leagues, sales teams, local jazz scenes, biology departments, Regional Emmy Award competitions, poker clubs, pub trivia tournaments, churches, PTAs, amateur film festivals, and online gaming competitions. Absolutely high material standing is a precondition of participation in many of these associations.²⁸ Thus, improving the absolute material condition of the relatively poor can improve their social standing and self-respect, even if their *relative* position in the distribution of wealth is unchanged. Wealth can facilitate the formation of new social groups in which individuals can compete and excel. It can do this through direct means, for example by expanding capital-intensive associations ranging from the lofty (e.g., universities, laboratories, wine tasting clubs, film and music industries) to the prosaic (e.g., online “Fantasy Football” leagues). An enrichment of economic opportunity can also expand and diversify our prospects for achieving standing through work. Moreover, wealth can encourage the formation of new social groups indirectly by increasing individuals’ disposable income, leisure, and education, thus enabling them to participate in—and gain standing through—activities like chess competitions, golf, bridge, Civil War reenactments, and so on. In sum, wealthy societies multiply the frames of reference for social comparison and thus allow people to enjoy more opportunities for favorable comparisons.²⁹

These considerations show that it is possible for general increases in wealth to enhance the self-respect of those with relatively less wealth even if their position in the distribution is unchanged. Thus, wealth-as-a-means-to-self-respect is not a positional good in principle. However, perhaps we should still regard wealth as having this positional dimension in practice: leveling down wealth may be a more effective strategy for benefiting the worse off than expanding wealth. The remainder of the section contests this claim. I argue that the gains in the self-respect of the worse off due to leveling down wealth are likely to be modest enough that even small gains due to economic growth will surpass them.

3.2 Wealth as a Means to Self-Respect in Practice

There are a variety of reasons to doubt that compressing wealth differentials will generate appreciable gains in the self-respect of the materially worse off. First, research suggests that people’s social comparison class tends to be local, not global.³⁰ Rawls writes, “We tend to compare our circumstances with others in the same or in a similar group as ourselves, or in positions that we regard as relevant to our aspirations.”³¹ Our focus on local comparisons may be due partly to the vividness effect. Social psychologists Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross say that information is vivid when it is “likely to attract and hold our attention and to excite

²⁸ I am grateful to Will Wilkinson for valuable insights into wealth’s role as a producer of new social bases of self-respect.

²⁹ Scanlon notes that diversification can mitigate problems of self-worth. Scanlon (2003, p. 216). Yet the ways in which high social wealth facilitates diversification have been generally overlooked.

³⁰ See, e.g. Frank (1985). For more on the importance of reference groups and their visibility, see Runciman (1966).

³¹ Rawls (1999, p. 470).

the imagination to the extent that it is [...] proximate in a sensory, temporal, or spatial way.”³² For example, our self-esteem might suffer when our preferred medical school destination rejects us but accepts our roommate. But most of us don’t stop to consider the hundreds of *other* applicants that also got in, or got into even better schools. *Their* acceptance letters don’t bother us because they are distant. However, our roommate’s letter affects us appreciably. Our focus on local comparisons militates against the claim that reducing the shares of the richest will significantly improve the self-respect of the materially worse off.³³ Moreover, simply narrowing inequalities without erasing them may even exacerbate the problem by increasing the competitors in the frame of reference of the materially worse off, thus further reducing their prospects for positional success.

Furthermore, the claim that compressing wealth differentials will generate appreciable gains in the self-respect of the materially worse off overlooks the importance of *ordinal* economic position. Echoing the earlier example of Maria Callas, when basketball star Bill Russell renegotiated his contract with the Boston Celtics in 1965, he insisted that he be paid \$100,001—narrowly topping the \$100,000 contract of rival Wilt Chamberlain. Pure rank matters to us. Empirical research corroborates this claim.³⁴ To the extent individuals focus on ordinal comparisons, the prioritarian rationale for leveling down becomes less compelling and less operational. Short of absolute equality, we cannot improve the ordinal rank of some without worsening the ordinal rank of others. Compressing, but not eliminating, inequalities will do nothing to improve the ordinal rank of the worse off.

But perhaps the lesson here is that we have (defeasible) reason to fully equalize economic standing. However, even complete economic equalization may ultimately do little to improve the self-respect of the worse off. Michael Walzer suggests that once some dimension of social comparison has been equalized, it ceases to be a valued source of recognition: “Even if we could somehow identify and collect [those goods that produce public recognition] and then give them out in equal parts, they would instantly cease (because of the equality) to command admiration.”³⁵ A contemporary American student may take pride in her ability to write in Latin, but presumably Lucretius did not. Part of the reason for this is that an ability to write in Latin makes someone unusual in modern America but not ancient Rome—in modern America, this is a quality by which someone can distinguish herself and gain a sense of self-worth. Favorable interpersonal comparison implies some source of differentiation.³⁶ If all the members of a peer group share some attribute, this

³² Nisbett and Ross (1980, p. 45).

³³ Perhaps we should worry that technological advances have expanded people’s comparison sets beyond their local circles. However, the most recent research suggests that one’s economic standing relative to the national distribution has little effect on life satisfaction. See Stevenson and Wolfers (2008). This finding is plausibly explained by our regarding local comparisons as the most relevant to our assessments of our own lives, as these comparisons concern those people who are similarly situated to us and with whom we are in the most direct competition for (e.g.) wealth and status.

³⁴ See Brown et al. (2008).

³⁵ Walzer (1983, p. 256).

³⁶ On this idea, see Nozick (1974, p. 243).

attribute is not a dimension along which they can distinguish themselves and thus favorably compare themselves to others.

Nevertheless, by equalizing material resources, we eliminate material resources as a source of unfavorable social comparison simply by eliminating them as a source of social comparison altogether. Thus, the prioritarian case for leveling down reasserts itself: leveling down material resources potentially improves the self-respect of the materially worse off. Yet there is reason to doubt that leveling down wealth will produce even this more modest gain in the self-respect of the materially worse off.

It may be the case that new dimensions of social comparison will replace those that have been leveled down and thus create new inequalities in social standing. Nozick suggests that when a good is equalized, people will substitute an alternate good possession of which confers standing.³⁷ This substitute now becomes a positional good, creating a new class of the worse off with respect to this new social basis of self-respect.³⁸ This thesis gains support from empirical evidence suggesting that status seeking is exogenous to particular social structures and culturally mediated forms of status.³⁹ Indeed, on the assumption that social standing is a key part of our self-assessments (an assumption on which the argument for leveling down standing-conferring goods seems to rest), we should not expect the elimination of one source of standing to deter us from competing over a *new* source. If a new set of unequally distributed standing-conferring goods appears in the place of material resources, then leveling down will not create a net gain in the self-respect of the worse off (that is, the worse off with respect to the standing-conferring good *du jour*). Even if no additional forms of standing arise, eliminating wealth as a dimension of social comparison by leveling it down can make matters worse if it means that people will compete for standing along one fewer dimension of comparison, thus making standing that much more scarce.⁴⁰

4 Social inclusion

Next, let's consider the argument that economic inequalities will lessen the amount of social inclusion enjoyed by the economically worse off. Brighthouse and Swift write that a "poor but equal society" may better secure "people's ability to participate in the communal life and shared practices of their society."⁴¹ The worry is that barriers to entry into a society's shared practices can be relative—often what one needs to participate in a group activity is to possess at least as much as everyone else, not to possess some absolute threshold of wealth.

³⁷ *Ibid.* See also Lucas (1965, p. 304).

³⁸ See Nozick (1974, p. 243).

³⁹ Both Robert Frank and Richard Layard cite studies that show that serotonin and testosterone concentrations in vervet monkeys correlate positively with standing in the dominance hierarchy. Frank (2000, pp. 140–142), Layard (2006, p. C27).

⁴⁰ See Lucas (1977, p. 267).

⁴¹ 2006, p. 481. See also Scanlon (2003, p. 212), Barry (2005, p. 174).

We should begin by noting that because there is no monolithic, homogenous good that constitutes social inclusion in a pluralistic society, individuals may be better off with respect to participation in one social practice while being worse off with respect to participation in others. Thus, the relevant question is whether the members of a poor but equal society will experience a *net* increase in social inclusion. Let's put the point in artificially precise quantitative terms: citizens enjoy greater social inclusion if they are included in more social associations in which they value participating. If so, social inclusion, like social standing, is not fixed sum. Here we see a resemblance to the arguments of the previous section. Just as societies can expand the dimensions of social comparison, they can expand the dimensions of social inclusion. Furthermore, general gains in social wealth can foster the creation of new dimensions of inclusion. Thus, *wealth-as-a-means-to-social-inclusion* is not a positional good in principle.

4.1 Wealth as a Means to Social Inclusion in Principle

Poverty may depress citizens' absolute levels of social inclusion by decreasing their access to valued social associations and depriving them of new forms of affiliation and belonging. Poorer societies may simply make fewer communal venues available to their citizens than wealthier societies. As noted in the previous section, many familiar forms of social participation are made possible by absolutely high economic standing. By way of further support, one can see the profusion of niche communities that have arisen in societies that afford their citizens abundant leisure time, disposable income, and expansive economic opportunities by browsing through the magazine section of one's local bookstore. There are communities for interior decorators, dog grooming enthusiasts, World War II history buffs, gourmet cupcake lovers, whiskey aficionados, "ultramarathoners," video gamers, knitters, and many, many more. Or consider the democratization of the production and distribution of literature, film, and music due to expanded access to technological goods. A cursory search reveals the wealth of subgenres in a single musical genre such as rock and roll, many of which originated within the past several decades (e.g., "space rock," "grunge rock," "industrial rock," "rap-rock," "groove rock," and so on). These new musical subgenres have given rise to new cultures and communities, each with their own customs and forms of belonging. Providing citizens access to a plurality of associations enables societies to meet the specific social needs of citizens who affirm a plurality of conceptions of the good.

Generally speaking, an absolutely wealthy society is able to supply its members with forms of association and belonging no matter how heterodox their conceptions of the good; it is the sort of place in which a home can be found for Trekkies, Elks, "Creative Anachronists"—even analytic political philosophers. And often these niche groups are the sorts of communities that provide members with their most highly valued forms of affiliation and belonging, even if outsiders cannot appreciate their value (at all).

A further example of a new, capital-intensive form of social inclusion would be "Web 2.0," which relies on emerging forms of social media such as Facebook and Skype along with hardware like smart phones and laptops. These resources create

new opportunities for inclusion by allowing people to bond over common idiosyncratic interests, interests that may not be shared by anyone in the area where they happen to live. Lovers of the blues, Polaroid photography, and abstract expressionism can connect with each another even when they live thousands of miles apart.

In addition to stimulating new interactions, these resources help people preserve old relationships. A recent study finds that social media has expanded people's social networks by enabling them to remain in contact with distant family members and friends.⁴² Networks of friends and family were previously much more restricted: only four to five years ago "it would have been unimaginable for young people to have their family members as part of their network."⁴³ Web 2.0 has also helped people create and sustain social bonds and romantic relationships that otherwise would have collapsed due to distance.⁴⁴ Moreover, evidence indicates that these new forms of social media do not replace personal interaction, but actually facilitate it by simplifying the creation and organization of "real-world" social events.⁴⁵ Access to these resources requires an economic infrastructure that a "poor but equal" society may lack, namely, one that supplies wealth sufficient to acquire computers, internet access, smart phones, leisure time, and so on. Indeed, we might say that part of what it means for a country to be "wealthy" is simply that it is stocked with these sorts of valued consumer goods.

4.2 Wealth as a Means to Social Inclusion in Practice

It is possible that growth can expand the number and availability of social associations and communities, thereby improving the levels of social inclusion enjoyed by all. Improving the absolute material condition of the relatively poor can increase their levels of social inclusion even if their relative position in the distribution of wealth remains unchanged. So wealth is not positional in principle when construed as a means to social inclusion. Might it nevertheless be the case that leveling down is more effective at fostering social inclusion than unequally distributed increases in wealth?

My previous remarks suggest that we face a tradeoff. Leveling down wealth can expand the number of worse off individuals who are potential participants in a particular community. Yet this result can come at the cost of contracting the number of communities in which those individuals are potential participants. Pluralism may be a decisive consideration here. Our tendency to value participation in a wide variety of communities speaks in favor of advancing social inclusion through expansion rather than contraction. More options allow for more specialized forms of affiliation and, in turn, greater sensitivity to the plurality of conceptions of the good affirmed by citizens.

⁴² Watkins and Lee (2010).

⁴³ Quoted in Paul (2011).

⁴⁴ Moore (2011).

⁴⁵ Watkins and Lee (2010, p. 2).

Moreover, just as we tend to care primarily about standing in our niche groups, it's intuitive to suppose that we also care primarily about inclusion in our niche groups. That is, our interests lie principally in interacting intensely with a small group of associates rather than society-wide communities. Indeed, research suggests that our cognitive limitations restrict the number of people with whom we can connect on a meaningful basis.⁴⁶ This consideration favors the strategy of expanding the number of communities to which individuals have access even if those communities are relatively less populous.

It is worth considering whether social inclusion might be fostered best by a society that is rich in absolute terms but sacrifices some gains in social wealth for the sake of greater equality.⁴⁷ I believe that social inclusion can be better served by gains in wealth rather than equality even in an absolutely wealthy society for some of the same reasons why it is better served by gains in wealth in an absolutely poor society. A wealthy society that is nevertheless poorer than it needs to be makes fewer niche communities available to its members than it otherwise could. Leveling down social wealth—even if not to a point where society is “poor but equal”—therefore lessens people's chances of finding communities to which they would value belonging. This consideration is especially pertinent in light of the discussion of pluralism above: as people's interests and social needs become increasingly diverse, the greater the value of a wide range of social options. Furthermore, insofar as we value inclusion in smaller, tighter-knit groups greater than inclusion in larger, looser-knit groups, even a wealthy society should prefer those policies that increase the number of intimate niche communities to which their members can belong.

5 Employment Opportunities

In this section, I contest the claim that education-as-a-means-to-employment-opportunities must be leveled down to increase the economic value of an education to those with relatively less education. The sort of value at stake here is instrumental: Brighthouse and Swift state that goods such as education with a competitive aspect “are valued, in part, instrumentally, as means to other goods, and their value as a means to the achievement of those goods is determined not by how much one has absolutely but by how much one has relative to relevant others.”⁴⁸ I argue that economic growth generated by increased education can improve the instrumental value of the education of the less educated without altering their relative position in the distribution of education.

5.1 Education as a Means to Employment Opportunities in Principle

If Mary the master's student and Donna the doctoral student apply for the same job, it seems as though Donna will, all things equal, land the job. Brighthouse and Swift

⁴⁶ Dunbar (1993).

⁴⁷ Thanks are due to an anonymous referee for raising this question.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 475.

write, “Preventing some people from achieving doctorates does nothing to improve the education of those with master’s degrees. What it does is increase the competitive value of those degrees, improving the labor market chances of those who have achieved them.”⁴⁹ Mary’s master’s degree is a better means to success on the job market with Donna and her doctorate out of the picture.

However, education generates positive externalities. Education can develop human capital, and in turn increase growth and overall employment opportunities.⁵⁰ Indeed, education is routinely classified as a *public* good for its effects on human capital and job creation. Although Donna’s education decreases the value of Mary’s education as a means to those particular jobs over which they directly compete at any particular time, her education need not impoverish Mary’s education as a means to jobs in general. In fact, Donna’s education may improve Mary’s job prospects. Suppose Donna’s superior education enables her to best Mary for a position at a research institute *and* cure cancer in her new position. Flush with new funding and a promotion, Donna later hires Mary for a position with higher pay, better benefits, and greater autonomy than the one she originally lost to Donna.

This example is stylized, of course, but it suffices to defeat the claim that there is “no way” that unequally distributed growth in the supply of education can “bring about a gradual improvement in the absolute position of the worse off” with regard to the instrumental value of an education.⁵¹ It is *possible* for an increase in the total supply of education to improve the value of the education of the less educated without altering their relative position. So we should reject the claim that education-as-a-means-to-employment-opportunities is a positional good in principle.

Brighthouse and Swift agree that the extent to which education is a positional good depends partly on the environment within which educational institutions function.⁵² However, their analysis of education is importantly different from the one offered here. They argue that we need to sever the causal link between enhanced education and enhanced job prospects to eliminate the positional aspect of education.⁵³ The idea seems to be that education is a positional good as a means to employment opportunities as long as enhanced education causes one to enjoy enhanced job prospects. However, I believe this claim is false.

In the example of Donna and Mary, there is a causal link between enhanced education and enhanced job prospects. However, education-as-a-means-to-employment-opportunities is not a positional good in this scenario because an unequally distributed increase in the supply of education improves the value of Mary’s relatively worse education as a means to employment opportunities. Education’s value as a means to success on the job market is not solely determined by relative

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 478.

⁵⁰ Brighthouse and Swift (2008) consider concerns regarding the negative effects of diminished human capital. Their focus, however, tends to center on the all-things-considered well-being of the least advantaged, whereas my focus here is confined to the employment opportunities of the less educated.

⁵¹ 2006, p. 475.

⁵² 2006, p. 488.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

position. Its value is affected by other factors, most notably the supply of jobs, and improving education can improve the supply of jobs by enhancing human capital.

It's true that Donna's relatively better education disadvantages Mary with respect to the particular jobs over which they compete at a particular time. Note, though, that this claim applies even to goods which are noncontroversially nonpositional. At any particular time, the supply of *any* good is fixed. So from a static perspective, every good, and every means to that good, appears positional regardless of what the goods or means are.

Consider apples as an example. At any moment, the supply of apples is fixed. Thus, at this particular time, relatively rich Ron worsens relatively poor Paula's apple-eating chances because he can outbid her at the apple market just as Donna can outcompete Mary on the labor market. But apples aren't positional goods, nor are the means to acquiring apples, because we can grow more equally valuable (e.g., healthy and tasty) apples over time. Similarly, it is possible to create more absolutely good jobs over time, even if one person's better opportunities worsen the opportunities of others at a particular moment.

5.2 Education as a Means to Employment Opportunities in Practice

Perhaps we should regard education-as-a-means-to-employment-opportunities as a positional good in practice. I have argued that education-as-a-means-to-employment-opportunities is not a positional good in principle because it is possible for an increase in supply of the good to "bring about a gradual improvement in the absolute position of the worse off." But perhaps the improvement is *too* gradual. Whether Pareto efficiency or leveling down will better advance the job prospects of the less educated is of course an empirical question the answer to which depends partly on the time frame under consideration—the longer the purview, the greater the ameliorating benefits of efficiency and, correlatively, the greater the costs of leveling down.

Still, it is natural to underestimate how quickly even slight increases in the growth rate can improve economic opportunity. As economist Paul Romer notes, "For operations such as compounding that depend on repeated multiplication, we systematically underestimate how quickly things grow. As a result, we often lose sight of how important the average rate of growth is for an economy."⁵⁴ Evidence indicates that each year of schooling increases economic growth by 0.58 percent.⁵⁵ Although this figure appears insignificant at first blush, consider an example to illustrate the effects of a 0.58 percentage point drop in the growth rate. Suppose we level down education by an average of 1 year per capita, dropping our growth rate from 3 to 2.42%. The effects of this decline in the rate of growth are staggering: it would cause nearly \$400,000 in losses over the 50-year career span of a worker whose initial salary was \$20,000.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Romer (2008, p. 128).

⁵⁵ Hanushek and Wößmann (2007, p. 4).

⁵⁶ For empirical evidence that the bottom quintile of the income distribution benefits from economic growth as much as others, see Dollar and Kraay (2002).

We see the beneficial effects of education on economic growth for all levels of education because different levels of education serve different yet vital purposes. Initial phases of education tend to emphasize the development of basic skills through imitation, while higher education fosters innovation, as well as the diffusion and transmission of new knowledge throughout society.⁵⁷ It is also worth emphasizing that the aforementioned growth figures are for existing educational institutions. The beneficial effects of education on economic growth would be even more pronounced were we to make educational institutions more efficient developers of human capital. So in our comparison of institutional reforms, we should weigh the expected benefits of leveling down educational institutions against the expected benefits of improving them.⁵⁸

Of course, this inquiry is preliminary. It is by no means intended to conclusively establish the superiority of the growth strategy. Rather, the aim is to show that it is plausible to think that leveling down education could have a major impact on growth rates and GDP, such that it diminishes the prospects of those with relatively less education over the course of their working lives. We cannot say anything remotely definitive by way of critical assessment of the leveling down argument without knowing more details of the leveling down proposal. To make a conclusive comparison of the leveling down and growth strategies, we would need details about the time horizon under consideration, the specific amount of education to be leveled down, specific estimates of the gains in employment opportunities of the relatively less educated made possible by leveling down education, and so on. Without these details, then, my critical comments remain merely suggestive.

Education's competitive value is sometimes understood in terms of a signaling or credentialing function.⁵⁹ So perhaps we can understand *education-as-a-means-to-credentials* as a positional good, in which case we may have reason to level down education to enhance the signaling power of the less educated. Yet signaling is a means to acquiring goods (jobs) that are made possible by production. For this reason, leveling down education to enhance the signaling power of the less educated may result in making that signaling power less valuable as a means to good jobs by deteriorating the job supply.

Moreover, credentialing performs a potentially useful function in its own right, even if the credentialing process is causally independent of the process of improving the performance of those being certified (e.g. the SAT aims merely to test and certify performance, not improve it). A credentialing scheme enables informed matches between jobs and applicants. An efficient allocation of scarce occupational resources improves economic productivity; thus credentialing can produce positive externalities that redound to the benefit of the worse off, even in terms of their long-term occupational opportunities.

Note further that to level down credentials isn't simply to equalize them, but to render them unable to perform their very function. Credentialing operates as a sorting mechanism. It classifies individuals according to relative differences in their

⁵⁷ Hanushek and Wößmann (2007, p. 4).

⁵⁸ Thanks are due to Harry Brighouse for this suggestion.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, Hollis (1982), Koski and Reich (2006)

expected future performance. If credentialing were precluded from tracking differences, it would cease to perform its function.⁶⁰ (The SAT would be worthless as a certifier if everyone received the same score.) For this reason, leveling down academic credentials would likely encourage people to seek out or create new forms of distinction.

Here we find a parallel with earlier concerns about social standing and the substitution effect. The pursuit of accreditation, like the pursuit of social standing, involves the pursuit of differentiation. Job seekers want to stand out from the field. However, insofar as a good is valued for its ability to differentiate its possessors, to equalize that good is to render it worthless. This effect generates an incentive to seek out alternative forms of distinction. Employers must differentiate between job candidates *somehow*. If education is equalized and thus nullified as a credential, then we should expect employers and prospective employees to turn their attention to a new form of credentialing that is not equally distributed and can therefore differentiate candidates. This new form of credentialing would thereby become a positional good: the labor market advantages the good confers on its possessor are determined by its possessor's relative position in the distribution. Thus, equalizing education-as-a-means-to-credentials may be self-defeating in virtue of generating inequalities in a new class of positional goods.

The preceding considerations suggest that we can recognize the social costs of arms races in educational credentials without endorsing leveling down education as a solution. The concern here is that people must acquire ever-increasing educational credentials to simply keep pace with their competitors on the labor market.⁶¹ For example, if all of one's competitors have a college degree, one needs a postgraduate degree to stand out. A socially costly prisoner's dilemma results: all job seekers must invest more time and resources in acquiring educational credentials and yet no one's credentials are improved relative to the competition. Leveling down education could eliminate this arms race by preventing job seekers from acquiring more education to differentiate themselves from other applicants.

There is reason to believe that leveling down education to stem the credentialing arms race will be counterproductive. As argued above, if education's value as a signal derives from its differential possession, then we should expect job seekers to react to educational equalization by investing in other signaling goods that are *unequally* distributed and thus enable them to stand out from the competition. In brief, eliminating the arms race in education incentivizes arms races in different credentials. If credentialing competitions are inescapable, we should favor those competitions with greater social benefits than the available alternatives. We must therefore consider whether the substitute forms of distinction that are likely to arise in the wake of leveling down education will be less productive of job creation than education. At first blush, this seems plausible. Once education is closed off as a source of differentiation, we should expect to see more people engaging in extracurricular pursuits like theater, chess, dance, music, speech, and athletics.

⁶⁰ I am grateful to John Thrasher for valuable discussions on this point and for emphasizing that equalizing credentials effectively destroys them.

⁶¹ Thanks are due to an anonymous referee for raising and helpfully expounding upon this objection.

These pursuits may enrich those engaged in them, but they likely do less than education to cultivate the sort of human capital that accelerates economic growth and job creation. Thus, as in the case of social standing, we need not be incautiously optimistic about the possibilities of growth to nevertheless be pessimistic about the leveling down strategy. Competition for educational credentials may simply be the best of our imperfect alternatives.

6 Conclusion

I do not take the arguments of this paper to undermine all positional good-based prioritarian arguments for leveling down. I have said nothing about the leveling down arguments for goods such as *occupational-standing-as-a-means-to-physical health* or *physical health-as-a-means-to-occupational-opportunity*. But I have offered a recipe for analyzing them. In brief, ask if unequally distributed increases in the supply of the good can produce gains in the value of the good for those with less, then examine whether growth or leveling down is likely to do a better job of helping those worse off with respect to the good. As I have argued, goods such as *wealth-as-a-means-to-self-respect* and *education-as-a-means-to-employment-opportunities* are not positional in principle. Thus, they differ critically from paradigmatic examples of positional goods: whether we ought to level down these goods is largely an empirical question rather than a conceptual one. I have also offered some considerations that can help us begin to answer that question.

Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the considerations I have discussed with respect to prioritarian arguments apply to other arguments that could be made in favor of leveling down the goods in question.⁶² For example, we might reasonably suppose that a better job is more valuable to the socioeconomically worse off than the socioeconomically better off. If so, a utilitarian could argue that some losses in the employment opportunities of the better off due to partially leveling down education are justified by the gains to the worse off. However, I have argued that leveling down education will tend to result in fewer labor market opportunities for the worse off, a consideration that would militate against the utilitarian case for leveling down just as it militates against the prioritarian case. My arguments against leveling down wealth and income could be redeployed in a similar manner.

In closing, positional good-based concerns that purportedly favor leveling down measures are not, I've argued, pervasive or decisive. Indeed, such measures may be self-defeating, making the worse off worse off. If so, we should not level down.

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⁶² I am grateful to an anonymous referee for emphasizing that my arguments could be extended in this way.

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