

# Seeking the good in education through a positive conception of social justice

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# Seeking the Common Good in Education through a Positive Conception of Social Justice

**Abstract:** Many Schools and Faculties of Education in the UK and in the Western world have ‘social justice’ written into their mission statements, and some departments and research centres based in Schools of Education include ‘social justice’ in their department names. But are they concerned by questions of social justice in education, or has the term become somewhat vacuous and devoid of substantive meaning? The present article subjects recent discourses about social justice in education to scrutiny and finds them wanting in various respects, in particular when juxtaposed with historical accounts of justice by philosophers such as Aristotle or Aquinas. Among the complaints made here is that most educational accounts (a) make do with a ‘negative’ conception of social justice as focused on specific cases of injustices without any positive conception of what social justice means in its entirety, (b) foreground institutional justice at the expense of justice as a moral or civic virtue, (c) fail to connect the identification of justice or injustice to an account of *phronesis* or practical wisdom for integrating values, (d) shy away from associating social justice with the ‘common good’ and (e) fail to get to grips with some thorny normative questions about the role of justice in the ordering of goods in a hierarchy towards the highest good. Along the way, various remedies are suggested in order to make ‘education for social justice’ a more workable ideal.

**Keywords:** social justice; educational discourse; Aristotle; Aquinas; highest good

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## **I. The perils of ‘negative’ social justice**

Concerns about social justice loom larger in educational discourse today than perhaps ever in the history of educational thought since the days of Plato and during a brief proliferation of interest in justice during the halcyon days of Kohlbergian moral developmental theory in the 1980s and 1990s. Many education departments in the UK have ‘social justice’ written into their mission statements, some departments and research centres based in Schools of Education include ‘social justice’ in their department names. This would suggest that there is a preoccupation with teaching and researching the facets of social justice, and its impact on education broadly, in the British Education System in the twenty first century. Various disputes about educational provisions and procedures that would previously have been couched in mere technical terms, relating to effectiveness and feasibility, or to important but non-justice-relevant values, are now conceptualised as debates about social justice in education. Those include, to name a few examples, worries about provisions for education (Courtney, 2015), fears that over-emphasis on academic attainment increases stress in the lives of students and reduces their engagement with learning (Howell, 2015; Hutchings et al., 2016; Horgan, 2007; Kulz, 2014) and even disputes over the relative importance of teacher autonomy, professionalism and accountability (Sahlberg, 2011).

What is striking about this radical revival of interest in social justice in educational circles, however, is how fragmented, underdeveloped and badly articulated the underlying socio-moral ideal of justice typically seems to be. It is often not entirely clear whether the same ideal is being invoked or whether people are talking at cross purposes. In some cases, ‘social justice’ just seems to function as an umbrella term for whatever the relevant author happens to value. We are not talking here only about the general fragmentation of value discourse, often attributed to a

postmodern period in educational thought, but rather about more specific shortcomings and lacunae in the relevant justice-in-education literatures.

The aim of this article is to reflect on the state of the current justice discourse in education and to offer some remedial suggestions. We are not proposing a new cure-all specification of social justice. Rather, the aim is to plot a path down which future social justice discourse needs to go in order to make it more educationally relevant and give it more theoretical and practical traction. Let us begin with three scattered observations which attest to the odd and somewhat paradoxical nature of educational discourse on social justice – and sometimes lack thereof where it matters most, as in the first example.

The UK Department for Education, under previous Secretary of State Damien Hinds, recently signalled the introduction of new benchmarking questions against which schools can assess their approaches to character education. However, social justice is not mentioned in these documents, although – historically – it is difficult to find prominent educational thinkers who would not have foregrounded social justice concerns as part and parcel of good character. This lacuna may create an impression of character education as one of the few areas of educational efforts where concerns of social justice are not considered relevant, and where the goal is simply the development of instrumentally valuable traits (such as resilience and self-confidence) that help the individual student thrive in isolation from any concerns about the common good.

Prominent educationist Elizabeth Campbell, who has written more than most others on the moral role of the classroom teacher, has recently come down as an ardent opponent of a social justice agenda in education, which she considers a ‘distraction’ from the core commitments of teaching (Campbell, 2018). A close look at the targets of her criticism reveal, however, that what she is directing her animadversions at is not social justice as traditionally understood in moral

philosophy but rather as a euphemism for identity politics and political correctness which she, in turn, considers to be forms of postmodern contamination. So, Campbell may, in short, not be the sworn enemy of a social justice agenda – understood along traditional lines – that she appears to some to be at first sight. Nevertheless, she explicitly rejects the moral requirement that teachers need to see themselves, and act, as agents of social justice motivated change. That someone as deeply engaged in the moral dimensions of teaching as Campbell has seen reason to object to ‘social justice’, as it is considered today, indicates that there must be something distorted about this discourse as it has developed in the recent educational literatures.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues that teachers should ideally be overt agents of social justice, and he nostalgically pinpoints a period in history, during the Scottish Enlightenment, when teachers were such agents. At the same time, MacIntyre is not sanguine about the capacities of contemporary teachers to overturn current free-market liberal theory and oppressive capitalist structures – the real reasons, in his view, why the basic justice rights of many children are not met in today’s world. As a matter of fact, he thinks that the dual role of preparing students for real life and helping them develop their potential places competing and incommensurable demands on teachers, turning them into no less than ‘the forlorn hope of the culture of western modernity’ (1987, p. 16): a truly tragic predicament. So, in MacIntyre’s view, although social justice should be an overarching aim of all teaching, current teachers do not have the intellectual nor personal resources to carry it through.

In this article we will be elaborating upon the assumption that current discourses on social justice in education have been led astray by lack of an overarching positive conception of what social justice is and how it is, or can be, motivated in teachers and students. In sum, our hypothesis is that – to bend a phrase coined by Isaiah Berlin about freedom – social justice discourses in

education have been reduced unduly to focus on what could be called ‘negative justice’: specific barriers to the actualisation of justice. In short, the discourses have bogged down into discussions of cases of discrimination against various marginalised groups. Now, fighting discrimination is a laudable enterprise and far be it from us to oppose it. However, something seems to have been lost along the way: namely, a ‘positive’ conception of social justice as an overarching aim to aspire to – an aim to which the common cases of discrimination focused on in the literature can be seen cumulatively as barriers.

While the history of philosophical thought, harking back to Socrates and Plato, has seen many examples of such ‘positive’ conceptions of justice being developed, the ‘negative’ conception also has its advocates. For example, Amartya Sen (2009) argues that too much energy has been spent on trying to advance positive, comprehensive theories of justice. The snag is, he argues, that no consensus can ever be reached on justice in the abstract, or on how a perfectly *just* society would arrange itself. Rather, we should concentrate on removing *injustices* upon which all reflective agents can agree: hunger, disease and discrimination, for instance. While we grant Sen’s point that positive conceptions of justice present a tall order in our multicultural post-Enlightenment times, we consider it a cheapening and coarsening of educational thought to give up completely on the aspiration for a positive conception of social justice in education and reduce the discourse to examples of ‘bad practices’ and ‘bad apples’.

Working with a positive neo-Aristotelian-cum-Thomist conception of social justice, we propose to argue that imbuing in students, through ‘character education’, ‘education for flourishing’ or just good education more generally, a spirit of seeking the common good through social justice would give current educational practices the socio-moral mooring that they so badly need. Such a positive account of what socially just education we will offer draws from a neo-

Aristotelian picture of human flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2020). The good we seek for all stakeholders in education – students, families, and increasingly large communities – is, we think, nothing short of human flourishing. Although there cannot be such a thing as human flourishing if there are not individual human beings who flourish, we argue that human flourishing is best understood as a common good, rather than just a matter of aggregate individual success, attainment, health and wellbeing. Our understanding of human flourishing is intricately tied to an understanding of virtuous activity and character education, again, in the context of pursuit of common good. In addition to providing a framework for thought about justice *qua* virtue and common good, we will give special attention to the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), urging that focusing educational efforts on helping students grow in practical wisdom is a surefooted way of helping them to flourish.

We conclude with a discussion of hierarchies of good, urging that educationalists cannot do without ways of encouraging students to think about whether there is such a thing as a highest good at stake that they can draw upon in orienting their lives, and that, in fact, educators and theorists also need to work in light of such an orientation.

## **II. Social justice and the common good**

Although educationalists rarely give precise, clear accounts of the concept of social justice that informs their work, most seem to be implicitly working with a picture of social justice focussed on ensuring that a particular sort of good outcome is accessible to as many students as possible. Some of the relevant desiderata are directly tied to compulsory education, for example, the need for an educated citizenry in a democratic polity and the need to give young people opportunities

to be successfully socialised in among a diverse peer group in order to give them experience that will suit them to successful adult lives in a pluralist society.

Whether the vision of a more socially just system of education looks to the need to equip students for economic success, or the need to give the experiences necessary for full participation in a pluralist democracy, or both, the sense of urgency in recent disputes seems rooted in an understanding that the school systems under discussion are in one way or another discriminatory. In other words, they are not providing fair access to all the students they serve, and so are failing some students (see e.g. Grant, 2012). While we share this assumption implicit in much of recent educational discourse, we regret how fragmented and compartmentalised (and often single-issue driven) the motivation towards social justice seems to be. Even when social justice is understood as a civic virtue, as opposed to a mere political ideal – which is mostly *not* the case, it is often treated as if it were a one-trick pony: if only *this particular barrier* to social justice in education can be overcome, then educational systems will change radically for the better. The lack of a wider lens often seems to come down to shyness in invoking any overarching conception of the common good and how social justice needs to be understood as contributing to that good in its entirety.

Admittedly, frank talk about ‘the good’, let alone ‘common good’, has been out of fashion in educational and social scientific circles for some time, but we think that there is no way to so much as understand recent disputes over what might count as socially just education without seeing them as fundamentally concerned with what will make for an education system in the service of the common good. For example, without presupposing that it is *bad* for the common good to ignore the interests of the most vulnerable, marginalised, and otherwise disadvantaged students, and that systematic discrimination is *wrong* from the perspective of the common good, one could not so much as see the point of some of the most fraught conflicts over education policy.

We want education to encourage students and teachers both to seek good and to work against bad. That is the spirit that animates, or at least should animate, work for social justice in education at every level – from the most abstract academic research to concrete pedagogical and curricular proposals. However, we believe ‘seeking the good’ is logically prior to ‘working against the bad’, and this explains our call in this article for a ‘positive’ conception of social justice.

All that said, educationalists can perhaps be forgiven for fastening on specific examples of injustice rather than invoking a comprehensive conception of social justice. The phrase in contemporary usage is commonly employed evasively and it is difficult to find a precise definition in a literature which is rife with diverse meanings and approaches. This is made even more complex when both liberals and conservatives regard their conflicting political causes to be socially just. There is the conservative view that, as human beings, we are not perfect nor are we perfectible and we live in societies that are not perfectly just to the extent that complete social justice is practically unattainable. In contrast, the liberal view is that our nature is not fixed but constantly changing with an almost unlimited potential for positive development. Since our nature is plastic, the obstacles to social justice are ignorance and faulty social institutions. This liberal view produces an optimistic belief in progress and in solutions to social problems which, it is believed, will eventually lead to the realisation of the good society.

The absence of common meaning and the increased tendency towards vague generality in describing social justice is well illustrated in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* by Adams *et al.* (2016). The book contains a collection of 95 articles and not one defines social justice in general, but instead they address numerous issues of perceived injustices. Multiple causes are promoted and this leads to a catalogue of negative words in the titles of the articles including: oppression, shame, stigma, struggle, guilt, prejudice, racism, sexism, homophobia, white privilege,

and much more besides. The *Handbook of Social Justice in Education* by Ayres *et al.* (2009) adopts a similar approach and together both texts call for active resistance to all the forms of injustice that they describe. The authors effectively call for a revolution to radically transform society by addressing historical injustice which they generally claim is caused by the failure of capitalism and liberal democracy.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the idea of social justice has increasingly become associated with an array of political progressives who seek to disrupt and subvert any arrangements in society that they perceive to marginalise or exclude people. To achieve their numerous social visions of society, it is necessary for them to obtain power in order to force through government policies which will provide the goods to which they aspire. These aspirations aim to reorganise society in the interests of the least advantaged by eradicating racism, oppression, poverty and discrimination and by reforming institutions such as schools. Education is the vehicle of choice used by such social justice advocates to remove ignorance and liberate the minds of students from the hold tradition and non-rational belief have on them. From these stated beliefs and causes, it is possible to move towards building a contemporary general definition of social justice, but progressive social justice advocates typically avoid taking that final step, perhaps for fear of committing the ultimate crime of producing a universalist definition that would jar with their radically pluralist sensitivities.

Contemporary social justice discourses in education place schools at the service of social change. The first thing to be observed is that talking about social justice in relation to school structures and educational systems typically avoids any emphasis on talking about individuals or their actions. The idea that educators ought to encourage students to cultivate their own virtue of justice, to become free moral agents in society and to contribute intentionally to its common good,

is almost wholly absent from the educational literature on social justice. Instead, this literature looks first to the conditions of equity in any given society based on economic or political structures rather than on individual persons. The ‘social’ element experienced by the individual in society is seen by social justice advocates as entirely socially constructed – not determined by biology, ecology or human nature, but rather as a creation of specific cultures situated in unique historical contexts. Consequently, this literature advocates for a redistribution of goods which is joined by claims for the recognition of the distinctive perspectives of ethnic and sexual minorities as well as gender differences. It is this new idea of social justice that is advanced today and which is focused on the recognition of subjectively self-defined ‘identities’ rather than objective ‘selves’. The ways educators go about defining social justice differ greatly, as already noted, but more importantly, while most will claim a social justice orientation in their work, few are able to say what it means in practice, apart from the amelioration of fragmented ills which do not necessarily have much in common, conceptually, morally or historically, except being ills. What separates our view from a standard conservative critique of this literature is that, rather than simply dismissing it as blue-sky thinking, we do not consider it systematic or radical enough.

John Rawls is perhaps the contemporary philosopher most closely associated with the idea of social justice through his work *Theory of Justice* (1971). He believed that rational individuals ought to create a society that is just and that justice is the first virtue of social institutions (1971: 3). Justice for Rawls is seen in terms of fairness in the distribution of goods. This has led to the idea that the desire for economic and social redistribution is actually pinpointing a right and that an individual has a claim on society to provide certain goods and services which must be made available by the efforts of others. By confounding *rights* with *desires*, such advocates of social justice often ignore the corresponding duty to every right. If a person has the right to the ‘full

development of personality', then some other person must have the duty of supporting them. This can lead to the mistake of equating society with the State and actually minimise the responsibilities and duties of individuals. Moreover, in an un-Aristotelian move, Rawls sought to eliminate any sense of pre-institutional deservingness (or lack thereof) from the concept of social justice.

It is worth exploring the historical origins of the concept of social justice. It is possible to trace the origins of social justice to Biblical texts such as Job 31: 16-22. In *Galatians*, in the New Testament, St. Paul makes clear that helping all people is not optional, but is a command. Yet to assist others in distress was still a *choice* made by a free person, as the recipient of aid could not claim this as a right. The virtues of mercy, charity, generosity, beneficence and gratitude are meaningless if what one gives to another is her by right. The example of the Good Samaritan further reminds us that it was a Christian duty to love our neighbours as ourselves. In these texts one could say that social justice involves working with or without others to accomplish a work of justice for the good of others. Justice is perceived as a virtue which in turn is seen as an attribute of an individual or a community. Justice, here, is not imposed by a government policy, but lies within the virtuous actions of the individual and of individuals in concert.

Christianity inherited the dual intellectual traditions of Jerusalem and Athens. Aristotle was clear that justice is one of the virtues that a State and an individual must possess. In both his *Ethics* and *Politics* Aristotle spoke of the distributive nature of justice. Social justice is about relationships with one another and for Aristotle it emphasised the social nature of human beings which Thomas Aquinas expanded to the duties and obligations we owe each other in helping to advance the common good of society. Building on Aristotle, Aquinas understood the common good to be that which benefits society in contrast to the private good of individuals. Citizens were not to exploit one another and in this sense the idea of the common good went beyond social justice, for it

required the good citizen to literally will the good in others; either through the virtue of friendship (*philia*) in Aristotle's sense or the virtue of charity or love (*agape*), in the Christian sense. This is perhaps too much to expect, however, within a modern secular society.

The first use of the term 'social justice' (as distinct from mere 'justice') was by a Jesuit priest in 1840. Fr. Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio (1793–1862) wrote *Theoretical Essays on Natural Rights* (1840) in which he explicitly refers to 'social justice' as emerging from a Thomistic natural law tradition. His aim was to combine classical ideas with more progressive modern ideas of the good society. Another priest, Fr. Antonio Rosmini-Serbati (1797–1855), wrote *The Constitution under Social Justice* (1848). Both priests were working out of a scholastic philosophy tradition that saw social justice rooted in the moral virtues: this view endorsed the Aristotelian notion that moral virtues serve human flourishing. They both saw the common good of society as taking precedence over individuals or social classes. They spoke about the civic virtues as the cement that held society together and saw social justice as involving some degree of economic and social equality as well as emphasising that human beings need to be treated with dignity and respect. For them, social justice required public virtue which in turn required the formation of citizens who were willing to serve each other, particularly to ameliorate social suffering and distress. In this vision of society, the individual, rather than the State, is placed at the centre. This notion of social justice was premised on an entire tradition of Catholic philosophy, especially its primary Aristotelian wing, but it has played little part in contemporary social justice efforts. This Catholic notion of social justice was endorsed by classic liberals in the nineteenth century minus the Thomistic orientation. It led to the development of more fluid definitions of social justice which came to be understood in a much looser sense by the end of the nineteenth century, as can be seen, for example, in the

secular version proposed by John Stuart Mill, as he tried to accommodate a social justice requirement within the edicts of utilitarianism.

A restoration of a more neo-Aristotelian view can be seen in Michael Sandel's (2009) understanding of social justice which he detailed in his three components of social justice: (1) justice involves maximising welfare, (2) justice involves always respecting some aspect of personhood, and (3) justice involves ideas about promoting the common good. In other words, welfare, freedom and virtue are the three components of social justice for Sandel who goes on to criticise the established liberal view that public debate should be neutral in regard to ideas of the 'common good'. Sandel (2009) advocates that we should engage in moral discussion in the public domain because 'Justice is served when people are acting as they ought to, in accord with morality and virtue'.

William Galston (1991) makes a useful distinction between virtues which are instrumental and necessary for the well-being of society and those virtues which are seen as intrinsically valuable as ends in themselves. In regard to education, it is necessary for the State to educate to foster good citizens, but social justice advocates in education appear to lack a cohesive conception of a life well lived or of anything that is intrinsically valuable. They do not attempt to directly further a particular and coherent view of human wellbeing, but rather favour many different visions of the human good even if those are contradictory. They are generally open to schools promoting critical thinking, new ideas, active participation in society, respect and tolerance, and they are against the use of force and are typically open to the ideal of compromise. These principled, and yet minimalist, 'virtues' generally set some parameters about how to conduct our common life, but they do not tell us what ends we should seek together. One could call them instrumental or procedural virtues, but a life that promotes social justice for the common good will require not

only *procedural* virtues, but *substantive* virtues that aim at particular ends. For people to be truly committed to social justice for the common good of society, we need to create forms of life, nourished through education, in which virtue is central to the good of human beings.

Despite our lamenting in this article the lack of a coherent ideal of social justice in recent educational discourses, it is perhaps unwise to be too precise in formulating a definition, since social justice an open-textured concept. Yet even an open-textured concept can have a common core. We would argue that social justice does, but that this core is often neglected or bypassed altogether. Claiming to promote social justice is essentially to *make a moral claim*, but it is often used too indiscriminately to recognise the basis of the claim. It can entail, by way of intention (if not merely used as a good catchword), a profound concern for human wellbeing and even focus on the dignity of every human being, but justice is a moral virtue with a social dimension (hence often categorised as a civic virtue), and the ‘social’ dimension is precisely its orientation to the common good. To promote social justice is therefore, more than anything else, to promote the virtue of social justice and this virtue is at once conducive to and constitutive of human flourishing. Such promotion requires work at multiple levels, including the social conditions in which virtues flourish or wither. The cultivation of the self through social justice leads to and is nourished by the collective, for to preface ‘justice’ with ‘social’ is to emphasise the social nature of being a human person. As a virtue, therefore, social justice involves our willingness to promote the common good of the communities to which we belong: literally, to will the good *in* and *for* others. It must involve the positive conditions in which we can promote the flourishing of the individual and community. Limiting ideas of social justice advocacy to the detrimental effects of particular injustices on educational policy or institutional practices will not succeed in overturning historical injustices in ways that contribute to the common good.

### III. Positive psychology, and some lessons from Aristotle

Having complained above about the lack of a characterological dimension to current conceptions of social justice in education, it is instructive to turn momentarily to psychology. After all, there is a long tradition in psychology (especially personality psychology and later so-called positive psychology) of understanding socio-moral qualities as ‘character strengths’ of individuals. To be sure, in the well-known positive psychological taxonomy of 6 overarching virtues and 24 underlying character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), justice features as one of the virtues with the subordinate character strengths of teamwork, fairness and leadership. What exactly teamwork and leadership have to do with justice (rather than any other virtue) may be open to debate, as is the categorisation of fairness as a strength of character ‘representing’ justice rather than the two simply being considered equivalent or synonymous. We will let those issues pass for the moment in order to focus on some deeper problems.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) claim to draw on a long historical tradition that harks back to Aristotle. Yet they understand the so-called character strengths, in a very un-Aristotelian way, as traits of behaviour that can be boosted indiscriminately through education, with ‘more’ always being ‘the better’. There is no heed paid to Aristotle’s message that too much of a virtue turns it into a vice. For example, too strong a sense of justice will elicit excessive indignation or even begrudging spite. More seriously, positive psychologists tend to underplay the componential nature of virtues and, in particular, underappreciate the value of the *emotional* component which Aristotle saw as the core component of any virtue. In the case of justice, there are long sections in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* which explain the emotional components of justice: a general virtue which he saw as, more specifically, made up of four particular but interrelated virtuous emotions:

*indignation, compassion, gratulation and satisfied indignation* (Kristjánsson, 2006, chap. 3). From an Aristotelian perspective, the development of character has, in its early stages at least, mostly to do with emotional sensitisation. Therefore, to understand the educational dimension of Aristotle's theory of justice, it does not suffice to read his *Ethics* or *Politics*. Long before a child develops an understanding of the intricacies of social justice as a political ideal, she senses manifestations of justice and injustice in her immediate surroundings and cries out – as young as aged two: 'This is not fair!' No account of justice as an aim of education will therefore work, according to Aristotle, which is not directed in the first instance at the development of proper emotions: learning to 'feel' justice or injustice at the right times and in the right proportions.

The third and most serious mistake committed by positive psychologists – and the one most immediately relevant for the purposes of the present article – is its elision of any meta-virtue of adjudication when two virtues, such as justice and considerateness, may (seem to) come into conflict with one another. In Aristotle, the 'conductor' of a person's character 'orchestra' is the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Without it, the moral virtues cannot really be actualised in any coherent way.

*Phronesis* has many functions in Aristotle's system (Darnell *et al.*, 2019), but two are most salient in the present context: the *blueprint* function and the *integrative* function. *Qua* blueprint, *phronesis* furnishes the individual with a general account of the good life as a life of individual and communal flourishing (*eudaimonia*): a sort of benchmark against which all potential socio-moral decisions can be measured and which lays the foundations of the person's moral identity. *Qua* its integrative function, *phronesis* arbitrates when the individual faces dilemmas and hard choices, ensuring that there is an overall cohesion to her characterological make-up. Although Aristotelians typically focus their examples of the use of *phronesis* more on cases where *different*

virtues collide, *phronesis* also helps integrate responses by the *same* virtue in different situations. In default of it, the person becomes a kind of human chameleon, without any common core, without any integrity.

Couched in Aristotle's language we can, therefore, reframe our repeated complaints in earlier sections of this article about the social justice discourses in education as complaints about discourses that seem to lack the required sense of the role of practical wisdom in the flourishing life. Without a blueprint of the good life – in this case without a positive conception of social justice – educationalists flounder down the cul-de-sac of fighting individual ills of injustice without any sense of what combines them into cases of injustice. And devoid of the integrative function of *phronesis*, efforts at mitigating injustice run the risk of being unsystematic, incoherent and even arbitrary. Fighting social injustice without the aid of *phronesis* would, for Aristotle, be a case of not seeing the wood for the trees, and we agree. Hence, justice education must, in our neo-Aristotelian view, more than anything else involve the development of practical wisdom. A happy side-effect of such education is that the student does not only become better at noticing cases of social injustice and understanding what they have in common; she becomes at the same time a better-rounded person overall and with a clearer moral identity across the board. However, having a clear moral identity, informed by a blueprint of the good life, requires some engagement with a fundamental question of morality: of how to seek the highest good.

#### **IV. Seeking the highest good**

Developing a sense for what matters in life, developing emotional sensitivities that match this sense and understanding the ways in which one can contribute to the common good requires developing a sense for which goods are most important in one's circumstances. Noticing which

goods are most important in which sorts of circumstances will help students develop their sense of what matters in life in a way indispensable to beginning to articulate the blueprint they need if they are to grow in or towards practical wisdom. More than this, it is in light of a sense of the relative importance of the things that matter most to them that students can find some guidance in integrating the cognitive, emotional, and affective attachments that provide the core of good character. A positive conception of a socially just educational system will emphasise the need to support and promote character development as a crucial ingredient of individual human flourishing, and students' efforts to articulate their sense of the relative importance of the goods they seek in and from life as one part of this. Sometimes, the relative importance of different goods varies from one situation to the next. Suppose that we are rushing to get to a staff meeting – punctuality and the species of fidelity that has us showing up for staff meetings tend to be good – and notice an injured child crouching in a doorway. Chances are that pausing to help the child is more important than timely arrival at the meeting. The world can produce circumstances that require that we shift focus even when our eyes are trained on something good. It is not in anyone's power to prevent such things from happening. We take it, then, that having a sense that some goods are more important than others in various circumstances belongs to a perfectly ordinary understanding of what matters in human life, an understanding that everyone interested in providing socially just education would be expected to share.

Why is it not enough to understand that people will try to seek such good as they can recognise without taking the extra step of supposing that we need to see ourselves as participating in communities striving to realise a highest good? What does a sense for the highest good add, morally and educationally, to our efforts to understand our general attraction to good, willingness

to will the good in others and self-understanding as unique individuals drawn toward participation in communities devoted to realising good in the lives of all their members?

A sense for the highest good allows us to set our priorities better. If we know, for example, that we most want all of our students to flourish – to realise their potential, to develop their particular talents and capacities, and to support the flourishing of their fellow students – we know that lessons and classroom environments need to be geared to the needs and grounded aspirations of our students. We can use our concern over providing educational resources that promote flourishing to think differently about all aspects of our lives with our students and to provide opportunities for students to contribute to the wellbeing of their fellows. Rather than just working to strengthen their individual skills in maths, for example, we might design exercises that give more advanced students opportunities to help students who are struggling, setting up expectations in our classrooms that we thrive best when we thrive together. This is setting social justice in context rather than just focusing on specific examples of injustices.

Then, too, having an overarching sense for the highest good explains why we may be willing to sacrifice some measure of private advantage for the sake of the higher good. As educators, we often find ourselves putting the interests of our students and institutions ahead of opportunities for private advantage. When we do this, we normally have some sense of doing so because we are willing to leave self-interest to the side for the sake of something more important. Moreover, understanding ourselves as working for the sake of shared participation in realising a higher good than mere private advantage helps us to build supportive and sustaining relationships with our colleagues, with our students, with parents, and with the broader communities that we serve, involving ourselves in networks of relationships that can sustain us when we face the ordinary run of frustrating or disappointing aspects of life and work.

Although some of the most profound thought about the highest good has been produced by thinkers operating in distinctive faith communities, nothing about this thought requires a theological basis. John Stuart Mill, for example, provided powerful secular work on the highest good throughout his career.

Philosophical interest in the highest good was still alive when John Stuart Mill published his *Utilitarianism*. Mill wrote:

From the dawn of philosophy, the question concerning the *summum bonum*, or, what is the same thing, concerning the foundation of morality, has been accounted the main problem in speculative thought, has occupied the most gifted intellects, and divided them into sects and schools, carrying on a vigorous warfare against one another. And after more than two thousand years the same discussions continue, philosophers are still ranged under the same contending banners, and neither thinkers nor mankind at large seem nearer to being unanimous on the subject, than when the youth Socrates listened to the old Protagoras.... (Mill, 1969, vol. 10, p. 203).

Famously, Mill held that the highest good is the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. And Mill took it that it was in our power to attain this end, although what Mill understood by 'happiness' is far more interesting than what Jeremy Bentham or, later, Henry Sidgwick had in view. More than this, Mill argued that attaining the end that governed and shaped his utilitarianism demanded significant collective action, political reform and cultural change (Vogler, 2002).

Complaining about Bentham, Mill wrote:

[The problem with Bentham is that he has] confounded the principle of Utility with the principle of specific consequences, and has habitually made up his estimation of the approbation or blame due to a particular kind of action, from a calculation solely of the consequences to which that very action, if practised generally, would itself lead. He has largely exemplified, and contributed very widely to diffuse, a tone of thinking, according to which any kind of action or any habit, which in its specific consequences cannot be proved to be necessarily or probably productive of unhappiness to the agent

himself or to others, is supposed to be fully justified; and any disapprobation or aversion entertained towards the individual by reason of it, is set down from that time forward as prejudice and superstition. It is not considered (at least, not habitually considered,) whether the act or habit in question, though not in itself necessarily pernicious, may not form part of a *character* essentially pernicious, or at least essentially deficient in some quality entirely conducive to the 'greatest happiness'.... When a moralist thus overlooks the relation of an act to a certain state of mind as its cause, and its connexion through that common cause with large classes and groups of actions apparently very little resembling itself, his estimation even of the consequences of the very act itself, is rendered imperfect. For it may be affirmed with few exceptions, that any act whatever has a tendency to fix and perpetuate the state or character of mind in which it has itself originated. And if that important element in the moral relations of the action be not taken into account by the moralist as a cause, neither probably will it be taken into account as a consequence (Mill, 1969, vol. 10, p. 8).

In short, carefully read, Mill's interest was neither in the outcomes of individual acts, nor in the outcomes of a general adoption of one or another rule. Mill's understanding of happiness was instead rooted in concern over character and self-actualisation as guided by character. Accordingly, his account of the highest good carries some of the depth of an account focused on *eudaimonia* and virtue. For this reason, it may be more accurate to couch Millian doctrine in terms of 'flourishing' than it is to cast it in terms of 'happiness', and to relate it to Aristotle and Aquinas rather than Bentham. He is, after all, the thinker who devoted a whole chapter on justice to his treatise on utility and who famously insisted that it was better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a perfectly content and happy swinish person.

Whether or not all educationalists are comfortable signing up to the thought that there is a single highest good, best identified with the flourishing of all of our stakeholders, is moot. We think that this thought is at the root of a serious positive understanding of socially just education. Equally moot is whether or not we take it that this good shapes every aspect of our lives. We

contend that it has a serious claim to be the best way to organise our efforts at working toward social justice in education. What aim is better suited to bring to light the shared concern underlying recent disputes? What focus is more apt for highlighting the concern we share, even if we have been caught up in a fragmented and contentious disputation over specific injustices in education? At the very least, how can we so much as pretend to have our students' interests at heart if we fail to make room for *them* to develop a sense of their own lives as preparing them for full participation in pursuit of common good in ways that grow from their own capacities, interests and attachments?

### **V. Concluding remarks**

In this article, we have sought to re-orient the conversation about what social justice means in education. We share the sense that it is important to work against various forms of injustice in education, but in order to do so effectively, we need to work with a positive conception of what a socially just education might be. How else can we even hope to identify what is uniformly going wrong in the places where we see discrimination or other kinds of failures to serve our students, their families and the larger communities in which we work?

To this end, we have suggested that educationalists should seek to foster and promote a positive concept of social justice that embraces flourishing. In the first instance, we should support the development of students' flourishing as individuals whose academic attainment must be integrated with personal development and opportunities to grow in wisdom. But the kind of flourishing that education must support is not just the aggregate flourishing of our many students. We must see the efforts to nurture our students in light of shared pursuit of a common good that goes well beyond aggregate private advantage. It is not just that we want to be part of a fair and importantly egalitarian educational system: a better system of education. We want to be part of a better world,

and to help our students, their families and their communities participate in the realisation of a better world. We all understand that education is vital in any such effort. Our own willingness to do without some things for the sake of our students shows that we already understand our work in this broader scheme of things.

We take it that this is the better focus for work on behalf of a socially just educational system.

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