

Education, justice and natural talents: Rawls, meritocracy and educational egalitarianism

Educação, justiça e talentos naturais: Rawls, a meritocracia e o igualitarismo educacional

Educación, justicia y talentos naturales: Rawls, meritocracia e igualitarismo educacional

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the theme of education and its relationship with natural talent and merit in the context of Rawls' theory of justice. Starting with a bibliographical analysis, the text is divided into three parts: the first part discusses Rawls' conception of education, pointing to the relationship between talents and the natural and social lotteries, as well as pointing out the value and purpose of education from the point of view of justice as equity; the second part discusses education from the distributive point of view; finally, the third part investigates the conception of merit and its consequences for education, suggesting that justice as equity is associated with a type of educational egalitarianism as a result of the rejection of meritocracy in the educational field.

Keywords: Education. Natural Talents. Deserve. Meritocracy. Educational Igualitarism.

RESUMO

Neste artigo, examina-se a temática da educação e da sua relação com os talentos naturais e com o mérito no contexto da teoria da justiça de Rawls. Partindo-se da análise bibliográfica, o texto foi dividido em três partes: na primeira delas, dedica-se à discussão da concepção de educação que Rawls encampa, apontando para a relação dos talentos com as loterias natural e social, bem como ressaltando o valor e o propósito da educação desde a justiça como equidade; na segunda parte, discute-se a educação desde o viés distributivo; finalmente, na terceira parte, investigando-se a concepção de mérito e os seus desdobramentos para a educação, sugere-se que a justiça como equidade está associada a um tipo igualitarismo educacional como desdobramento da rejeição da meritocracia na seara educacional.

Palavras-chave: Educação. Talentos Naturais. Mérito. Meritocracia. Igualitarismo Educacional.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el tema de la educación y su relación con el talento natural y el mérito en el contexto de la teoría de la justicia de Rawls. Partiendo de un análisis bibliográfico, el texto se divide en tres partes: la primera parte discute la concepción de Rawls sobre la educación, señalando la relación

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entre los talentos y las loterías naturales y sociales, así como señalando el valor y el propósito de la educación desde el punto de vista de la justicia como equidad; la segunda parte discute la educación desde el punto de vista distributivo; finalmente, la tercera parte investiga la concepción del mérito y sus consecuencias para la educación, sugiriendo que la justicia como equidad está asociada a un tipo de igualitarismo educativo como resultado del rechazo de la meritocracia en el ámbito educativo.

Palabras clave: Educación. Talento Natural. Mérito. Meritocracia. Igualitarismo Educacional.

INTRODUCTION

The last few decades have seen a renewed interest in political philosophy in education. Among the interrelated issues that arise are those of distributive justice and access to education in accordance with an educational system regulated by higher standards of justice. In this scenario, the notion of talent appears significantly in these discussions (Brighouse and Swift, 2008, p. 447; Giesinger, 2020, p. 789-795; Meyer, 2020, p. 799-805). The basic assumption of these conceptions is that people have natural and socially acquired talents, which should not be prevented from being realized by factors arising from social class, gender, religion, among others.

In fact, the association of merit with education is central to modern culture — although it was already present in antiquity, linked to the conception of moral excellence. In an interesting work dedicated to the history of merit, Kreimer (2000, p. 8) points out that, in the face of aristocratic prerogatives derived from birthright, *la carrière ouverte aux talents* presents itself as the main purpose of social reform. This is what Weitz (1993, p. 422) refers to as the overthrow of the autocracy of social privilege in favor of the fundamental democratic ideal of a career open to talent. In fact, it was believed that the freedom to pursue personal destinies, regardless of social fortune, was a necessary condition for equality, so that, based on the provision of educational opportunities, the establishment of a democratic order was intended. The Enlightenment expression “to each according to his merit” shows that the distribution of occupation and social advantages is established according to the individual merit of each person in terms of personal talents, whether natural or social, establishing not an aristocracy of birth, but an aristocracy of talent (Kreimer, 2000, p. 17).

Despite these issues, Rawls’ writings offer a theory of social justice that, through its two principles of justice, presents itself as the most appropriate way to distribute primary goods, guide social institutions, and evaluate public policies (Freeman, 2007; Mourão and Seixas Miranda, 2013; Rohling, 2017). However, it is essential to bear in mind that Rawls, as a philosopher, is not strictly speaking an educational theorist, but because he problematizes issues of justice, he discusses points that have implications for education. Even though education appears very sparingly in his work, as he wrote very little about it, what little he did write is paradigmatic in the relationship between education and justice. Thus, the discussion of education within this conception of justice, which highlights the concepts of natural talents and merit, appears as a significant opportunity for these concepts to be problematized: on the one hand, because it operates through the terminology of natural talents, even though this is a concept that meets with some resistance today; on the other hand, because it promotes, in the development of the basic ideas of the conception of justice as equity, the rejection of merit as a distributive principle, since it is associated with morally arbitrary elements, such as luck in the face of the natural lottery.

In order to carry out this endeavor, based on a bibliographic analysis methodology, the analysis of the work will be divided into three parts: in the first, the conception of education

present in the theory of justice as fairness will be discussed, a section that will deal with the definition of education, its relationship with natural talents in the context of the natural and social lottery, as well as the affirmation of the value and purpose that Rawls confers on educational activity. In the second part, education will be problematized from a distributive perspective, in which education will be especially related to the second principle of justice. Finally, in the last part, the concept of merit and its ramifications for the educational field will be investigated. In this last part, we will attempt to suggest that the metric of natural talents is, in practice, impossible, so that the requirement of the principle of fair equality of opportunities for the similar *natural talents* becomes inefficient. With this, we hope to suggest that the concept of justice as equity, with this indication, is associated with a type of educational egalitarianism, which demands equal opportunities for all and that the position of those most disadvantaged by the natural lottery must be improved.

THE CONCEPT OF EDUCATION

Rawls does not develop a theory of education, and in general, his ideas on the subject are linked to how the state should be organized so that it can express, as implications of the principles of justice, institutions that are just.¹ Because of this, Rawls seems to present a weak conception of education, especially in the version put forward in *A Theory of Justice* (hereafter, *TJ*), which would remain in his later writings (Weber, 2010, p. 118-120), and would be exclusively focused on his political theory of justice (Johnston, 2005, p. 204).

Thus, following this understanding, the educational process in the context of the theory of justice as fairness, through institutions in general and educational institutions in particular, is seen as the development, on the part of the child and, later, the adult they will become, of aspects of their personality. This is how Rawls often characterizes education: it is education seen in a broader sense, that is, in the sense that it does not explain what happens in school, in the family, and in other social environments. As Johnston (2005, p. 204-206) explains, it is interesting to note the similarity with the notion that Kant himself had in mind when he discussed education, especially in relation to morality.²

However, it is also possible to perceive a stricter conception of what education is in Rawls' reflection on justice — in the context of which it is possible to understand its meaning and what it should provide. In this sense, his understanding of education is linked to the development of natural abilities based on the association with and enjoyment of the culture of his society. It is this point that will now be discussed.

EDUCATION AND NATURAL TALENTS: NATURAL LOTTERY *VERSUS* SOCIAL LOTTERY

Rawls (1999; 2009) does not explicitly conceptualize education, doing so only indirectly in a few passages. In one of them, when promoting the distinction between *moral virtues* and *natural talents* (*natural talents or gifts*): natural talents are “those natural capacities developed by education and almost always exercised according to certain characteristic intellectual standards,

1 Among the authors who have discussed the theme of education in Rawls' work, with varying interests, the following should be noted: Beattie (1982); Weitz (1993); Connell (1997); Meuret (1999); Brighouse (2002; 2005); Macedo (2000); Estêvão (2001); Gutmann (2001); Silva (2003); Dubet (2008; 2011); Gondim (2009); Brighouse *et al.* (2010); Weber (2010); Costa (2011); Rohling (2012); Brighouse and Swift (2014); Meyer (2014).

2 Johnston (2005, p. 203-206) points out that Kant did not intend, with his ideas on education, to describe pedagogical activities and processes per se, but rather to affirm, on the one hand, the development of aspects of children's moral character and personality and, on the other, that schools and educational institutions are spaces in which children learn ethical and political values and procedures.

or other standards, in relation to which it is possible to evaluate them appropriately” (Rawls, 2009, §66, p. 540). From this point of view, education is the process through which, on the one hand, natural talents and the skills associated with them are trained, and, on the other hand, moral and civic preparation and training take place (Gondim, 2009, p. 66), since it is up to education to engage people with the values of their societies. In fact, it is interesting to note that, from a political point of view, Rawls’ view of education:

Bases the importance of education on culture and self-esteem, and not exclusively on technical training and preparation for work — without, however, excluding it. Therefore, by appropriating culture — human flourishing, such as literature, musical and religious traditions, physical and artistic activities, scientific and technical productions, among others — individuals will reinforce their sense of self-worth and, more significantly, pursue their goals, whatever they may be (Rohling, 2016, p. 399).

However, this way of looking at the educational process is simple, but it revolves around the primary interest, which is the establishment of a theory of justice for a just society. Thus, any society that satisfies this minimum requirement for education will certainly have much to add to its system and its vision of education, but it will invariably be the minimum vision that a just society, with very different views of education, can satisfy. This is why Rawls (2016, p. 235-236) emphasizes political elements, such as civic education and constitutional values, as well as the virtues necessary for cooperation.

As stated earlier, natural talents are basically the set of natural abilities and capacities with which people are born and which are developed through education, affecting personal success and achievement throughout life, since they can be appropriately assessed in relation to the standards that characterize them (Rawls, 2009, §66, p. 540).³ As Hosein (2015) explains, Rawls uses natural talents to explain opportunities for success throughout life that come exclusively from genetic sources and, as such, depend on the social conditions into which one is born.⁴ These issues relate to what is called the natural lottery, which is an expression used to identify changes in luck that result from natural forces and not directly from people’s choices and social contexts. The natural lottery shapes the distribution of natural and socially conditioned goods (Engelhardt Jr., 2004, p. 454). *A contrario sensu*, the social lottery expresses changes in luck that do not result from natural forces, but from people’s actions. In fact, it refers to the result of personal actions due to the complex and unpredictable interaction of personal decisions, as well as the unpredictable nature of the results, which do not conform to an ideal pattern, and the dependence of the results on social forces rather than on the immediate decisions of those subject to them. In this sense, the *social lottery* shapes the distribution of social and natural resources. It is therefore the *natural and social lotteries*, associated

3 On this subject, Meyer (2020, p. 2-4) suggests that the concept of *talent*, including natural talent, is closely related to performance and achievement. In this context, talent is what enables or facilitates future achievements, since any reference to a person’s talents does not point to current abilities or other characteristics that a person may have, but rather to the future acquisition of these characteristics. This being the case, Meyer (2020, p. 2-4) states that a person has a talent for achieving a certain educational goal, in terms of a certain skill, if that person can achieve that goal in a sufficiently good educational environment, so that talents must also be seen as potential for achieving educational goals. Therefore, to say that someone has certain talents is to say something about a tendency toward future achievements, since, from this perspective, developed talents are potentials for future achievements based on actual skills that are developed and that may change over time.

4 On this subject, the author gives the following example: genetic dispositions to be successful in sports, do mathematics, maintain good health, be a skilled painter, among others, affect a person’s chances of success and, as such, present themselves as natural talents. In fact, these natural talents require conditions, namely social conditions, for them to be developed. Therefore, for someone to be a good athlete, they must meet certain social conditions, such as being properly nourished, having adequate training, and receiving appropriate medical care, among other things (Hosein, 2015, p. 553).

with free personal decisions, that determine the distribution of natural and social resources (Engelhardt Jr., 2004, p. 455).

In Rawls' theory of justice (2009), this tension between what is called the natural lottery and the social lottery leads the author to question whether it is fair that natural talents affect an individual's success in life. According to Rawls (2009), this natural distribution of talents, in itself,

is neither just nor unjust; nor is it unjust that persons are born into society at some particular position. These are simply natural facts. What is just and unjust is the way that institutions deal with these facts. [...] The two principles are a fair way of meeting the arbitrariness of fortune; and while no doubt imperfect in other ways, the institutions which satisfy these principles are just (Rawls, 2009, §17, p. 122).

Rawls' central idea is that people do not deserve the natural talents they possess and that, particularly for this reason, they cannot be seen as adequate parameters for guiding the *fair* distribution of *primary goods* — natural talents are a genetic basis for success in certain tasks, areas, and positions, if certain conditions are met. In fact, according to Hosein (2015, p. 553-554), not only are natural talents an impractical basis for the allocation of fair advantages, Rawls believes that it is unfair for people to benefit more from social and political agreements solely because of their natural talents, except under the condition that these inequalities result in a state of affairs that works to the benefit of the socially disadvantaged. From Rawls' perspective, in the case of education, there is no merit in having greater access to a more solid education consistent with the preparatory mechanisms for competing for positions and goods. In many ways, these are contingent aspects that prove to be decisive in relation to people's personal futures.

In fact, there is an issue to be discussed: the description of the educational process and its link to the realization and development of natural talents and abilities is problematic for the unfolding of the explanation of the functioning of the principles of justice in education because it compromises the *essentialist naturalist and biological view of human abilities* (Papastephanou, 2005, p. 502-510). According to this view, abilities (seen as natural talents and capacities) pre-exist people, are innate, and it is only up to education to develop them. Social relationships are of little importance in the development of these abilities, and the educational process is, it seems, not very dynamic, since people have capacities that are directly independent of teaching. In general, within this view, significant differences between people in terms of their ability to learn are independent of social efforts and arrangements — here, one could say, it is possible to draw a very close parallel with Plato in the following sense: education reveals the soul of each person, not promoting skills beyond what each person brings with them into the world. In addition, there is another issue: basically, it seems that it would be possible to classify and determine someone's degree of talent, provided that social contingencies (especially social position) were removed — ideas that are widely questioned in the fields of philosophy, psychology, and education.

THE VALUE AND PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

If what has been said above is true, then considerations about education need to be supplemented. One such supplement, with regard to the concept of education and its relationship to natural talents, is provided by the value that the author attributes to education itself. According to Rawls (2009), the value of education lies in the distinctive characteristic it gives people, rather than in the economic levels it allows them to reach. Rawls (2009, §17, p. 121) states that:

the value of education should not be assessed solely in terms of economic efficiency and social welfare. Equally if not more important is the role of

education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of his society and to take part in its affairs, and in this way to provide for each individual a secure sense of his own worth.

Regarding this passage, Macleod (2014, p. 172-173) explains that education is indispensable to the development of people's different talents and abilities. Thus, considering Rawls' emphasis on the value of education in relation to basic freedoms, fair educational institutions have at least three complementary objectives: first, they facilitate the development of the moral powers required by the equal value of basic political freedoms and equip citizens with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for meaningful participation in democratic deliberation and collective decision-making; second, they better prepare citizens with economically valuable knowledge and skills; and third, they more effectively facilitate citizens' access to the appreciation of culture — art, literature, and music — in a way that helps ensure a sense of self-respect for each person.

Nevertheless, Rawls (2009) still credits education with a central role: on the one hand, to develop autonomy in order to enable people to act in accordance with principles of justice, and on the other, to resolve social inequalities by favoring the less well-off in the context of institutional arrangements. Thus, as it is not measured by efficiency or any well-being it may provide, the importance of education is associated with the promotion of individual autonomy and the reduction of social inequalities. In fact, considering what has already been stated, Rawls believes that a theory of justice must resolve these naturally arbitrary inequalities, which effectively occurs through the provision of educational opportunities, such that education is an element that allows access to primary goods (Rohling, 2012, p. 146). In addition, education has another role: the development of individual autonomy. As already mentioned,

This aspect is achieved when, by allowing the training and improvement of individual talents and skills, people gradually begin to act in accordance with the principles of justice that they would accept as free and equal individuals. Evidently, through the development of a sense of justice, people are led to accept these principles and endorse them as those they would choose in an initial position of equality (Rohling, 2012, p. 147).

Evidencing the influence of Rousseau and Kant, such a view implies that, by acting in accordance with and out of respect for principles of justice, individuals act autonomously and achieve moral development. This means that, as Rawls wrote in *TJ*, education should promote individual autonomy by providing the development of skills and abilities that enable people to act in accordance with principles of justice that they would accept as rational, free, and equal. This is achieved through moral learning, condensed into the three laws of moral development for the formation of a sense of justice (Rohling, 2012, p. 147). Thus, the function and purpose of education is to achieve individual autonomy as well as to distribute and allow access to primary goods.

EDUCATION AND THE DISTRIBUTIVE PROBLEM

Education is also related to Rawls' distributive problem, since justice as fairness is conceived particularly as a theory of social justice. The two principles of justice lead to the idea that the principle of equal liberty refers to the system of liberty, while the second principle concerns the equitable distribution of basic goods. In effect, education is associated with the distribution of primary goods to mitigate social disparities. In this vein, for Rawls, the second principle provides that resources

should be used for the less fortunate as a way to promote equity in the system.⁵ Thus, Rawls (2009, §17, p. 120) argues that the difference principle must, “to treat all persons equally, to provide genuine equality of opportunity,” equality here being not only formal but also substantial. This is how, for Rawls (2009, §17, p. 121),

the difference principle would allocate resources in education, say, so as to improve the long-term expectation of the least favored. If this end is attained by giving more attention to the better endowed, it is permissible; otherwise not. And in making this decision, the value of education should not be assessed solely in terms of economic efficiency and social welfare.

Thus, according to Rawls (2009), with regard to the application of the second principle to education, the education system should provide equal educational opportunities for all, offering, when necessary, compensation for those who, despite having similar abilities, would find it difficult to compete in the realization of their rational life plans in a similar way because they belong to the lower strata. Thus, for Rawls (2009), the principle of fair equality of opportunity is fundamental, as it establishes substantial equality, not merely formal equality. Thus, the social scheme may undergo changes to ensure that those whose work benefits society, understood as a mutually advantageous undertaking, also have better conditions. In a meritocratic reading of this principle, as Queralt (2016) does, it is important to state that:

The diversity of talents that individuals possess generates a great diversity of ambitions that require different positions and roles to be satisfied. Distributing education according to equitable equality of opportunity means giving each individual the possibility to develop their talents to the fullest. This suggests that there may be educational and employment opportunities that are only available to some individuals, not all, because they are the ones who can take advantage of them properly, that is, as a means to develop and apply their talents and abilities (Queralt, 2016, p. 261, own translation).

Certainly, for Rawls (2009), it is absolutely crucial that the principle of fair equality of opportunity be interpreted in line with the principle of difference so that, first, equitable equality of opportunity must be effective and articulated in the social scheme, ensuring that those with similar talents are not disadvantaged by their position in the natural lottery; and, secondly, disadvantages resulting from the social scheme are only justified if they are beneficial to those who are less favored. In this vein, the principle of equal opportunity is a corrector of social class differences, because:

Those with similar abilities and skills should have similar life chances. More specifically, assuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system. In all sectors of society there should be roughly equal prospects

⁵ It is essential to highlight that Rawls understands that his conception of justice, translating the idea of social justice, promotes equity in the system and not mere equality. Equity, in this particular case, is something distinct from equality, as it is not satisfied with the mere formal offering of opportunities, including educational opportunities, as in the case of classical liberalism, but translates into the assertion that differentiated treatment promotes the fair distribution of social advantages, as well as equity in the sense of equally equal opportunities (Freeman, 2007, p. 105). Thus, his theory implies substantial action, that is, it requires that the main institutions of society be oriented in such a way that the less favored class enjoys a larger share of the social product. Thus, equity lies in the fact that the condition of the less favored must be observed for the justice of the social system, since it is not a matter of strict and formal equality, but of egalitarianism.

of culture and achievement for everyone similarly motivated and endowed. The expectations of those with the same abilities and aspirations should not be affected by their social class (Rawls, 2009, §12, p. 88).

In the context of distributive justice, education is seen as a crucial element in resolving social inequalities and allowing fair competition among those with similar talents, regardless of social and natural contingencies. This is because while, on the one hand, the principle of equal opportunity establishes that education should eliminate social differences, on the other hand, this occurs because, in justice as fairness, this principle always operates in harmony with the principle of difference, which guarantees a distribution of the product of social cooperation that is fair to all, since it maximizes the expectations of those worst off in the social system. In *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls (2003, p. 61-62) states the following:

Fair equality of opportunity is said to require not merely that public offices and social positions be open in the formal sense, but that all should have a fair chance to attain them. To specify the idea of a fair chance we say: supposing that there is a distribution of native endowments, those who have the same level of talent and ability and the same willingness to use these gifts should have the same prospects of success regardless of their social class of origin, the class into which they are born and develop until the age of reason. In all parts of society there are to be roughly the same prospects of culture and achievement for those similarly motivated and endowed.

It is essential to highlight the lexical priority of the principle of equal opportunity over the principle of difference. According to Freeman (2007, p. 92), this priority can be expressed in several ways, namely: it can limit the degree of inequality of income, wealth, and other resources in other ways, as permitted by the principle of difference, for the benefit of the less favored members of society; lexical priority implies that equal educational opportunities cannot be limited for reasons of higher income and wealth for the socially disadvantaged. Consequently, it can be said that equitable equality of opportunity must be ensured before any inequalities can benefit those in disadvantaged social positions.

In fact, Rawls does not share this view, as it would imply admitting that individual talents impose a natural limit on education, as Nagel (1997, p. 303-321) argues. However, according to Freeman's explanation (2007), the principle of fair equality of opportunity corrects inequalities in educational opportunities that result from social factors, not natural factors. For this author, Nagel's (1997, p. 315-317) interpretation of Rawls is questionable for several reasons, namely (Freeman, 2007, p. 92-4):

- The *principle of fair equality of opportunity*, by imposing unequal educational benefits between the more and less talented, does not result in greater inequality of income and wealth. Clearly, by opening up employment opportunities, such a principle would promote a reduction in the inequality that the formal *equality of opportunity* of classical liberalism would establish, allowing more candidates to be in a position to compete for desirable positions, thereby reducing the level of income that the most favored would receive;
- Furthermore, when combined with the *principle of difference*, according to which *justice as fairness* is defined as equity, inequalities are only accepted if they benefit the less favored, which might not happen in a society under a liberal equality regime in which the distribution of income and wealth is decided by the market;

- Finally, one might question whether, in fact, the *principle of fair equality of opportunity*, by not allowing inequalities in educational benefits, effectively favors the talented, since Rawls does not conceive of this principle as part of a meritocratic social system that rewards talent to promote economic efficiency over other social values. In fact, the requirements of the principle of fair equality of opportunity are opposite: through this principle, it is required that those with less natural talent receive greater educational benefits, allowing them to develop their abilities in order to effectively take advantage of the full range of opportunities available in society.

Thus, the distribution of education should provide access to primary goods. As an element of justification for the principle of fair equality of opportunity, education aims to reinforce in individuals, through egalitarianism, a sense of self-worth and the social foundations of self-respect, without considering natural abilities, technological advancement, and the establishment of a meritocratic society focused on productive efficiency and perfectionist values, which would benefit the well-born. In this context, Rawls (2009) argues that, if individuals are unable to fully develop their abilities, however modest they may be, and if there is no open access to social positions on a fair basis for all, then:

Those kept out would be right in feeling unjustly treated even though they benefited from the greater efforts of those who were allowed to hold them. They would be justified in their complaint not only because they were excluded from certain external rewards of office but because they were debarred from experiencing the realization of self which comes from a skillful and devoted exercise of social duties. They would be deprived of one of the main forms of human good (Rawls, 2009, §14, p. 102).

Combined with the difference principle and respecting lexical priority, the principle of fair equality of opportunity guarantees greater educational benefits to the less favored, reinforcing, above all, the primary good of self-respect. Thus, education would act in the distribution of primary goods and in ensuring equal opportunities through the redistribution of resources, so that, through education, inequalities would be reduced, and it would be argued that this reduction in inequalities should not be seen unilaterally from the perspective of the economy or social welfare, but mainly through the ability to allow a person to enjoy the culture of their society and, consequently, participate in its activities. Thus, access to education, while maintaining the equity of the system, would allow and reinforce in the individual a sense of self-worth as a primary good (Rohling, 2012, p. 131).

EDUCATION AND MERITOCRACY: RAWLS AND DESERT

Many authors point out that Rawls develops an anti-meritocratic conception of justice, that is, that merit, from the point of view of (social) justice, has no distributive value.⁶ In this section, we will discuss the meanings of desert and its rejection in the theory of justice as fairness, and extend this analysis to education, defending a view contrary to educational meritocracy.

MERITOCRACY AND EDUCATION

Discussions about meritocracy have as their theoretical framework the work *The Rise of Meritocracy* (2008) by the English sociologist Michael Young, published in 1957. In this book,

⁶ Among these authors, the following are particularly noteworthy: Daniels (1978), Steinberger (1982), Scheffler (2000).

which seeks to narrate the formation of a strictly meritocratic society, Young (2008) explains that the logic that sustains it is that intelligence plus effort results in merit. This idea is appealing and, in terms of common sense, it is not difficult to find defenders in the most varied spheres of human experience. Therefore,

Meritocracy is a system based on the aristocracy of talent and not on some form of democratic or egalitarian justice; it consists of distributing jobs, positions, and social and economic rewards according to individual qualities and qualifications, so that individuals with greater skills and abilities should obtain the most important and prestigious positions and social status (González, 2007, p. 170, own translation).

From a meritocratic perspective, there would be no barrier to individual merit, such as social class, family background, ethnicity, gender, or religion, that could not be overcome by access to education. Therefore, it must be said that social equality (here we are referring to the comparison of a meritocratic society with any other that creates a social hierarchy) for all is no longer the goal. On the contrary, inequalities remain. However, what has changed is the way in which these social differences are justified, which are based on individual merit, that is, a combination of personal talent and effort, so that inequalities are legitimate.

In the field of education, there is an educational meritocracy, with major effects on its institutions, particularly on schools, as Meuret (2000, p. 447) points out, when society puts its educational system at the service of discovering the most talented individuals and promoting them.⁷ This is done through equal opportunities. According to Dubet (2008, p. 11),

equal opportunities are the only way to produce fair inequalities when considering that individuals are fundamentally equal and that only merit can justify differences in remuneration, prestige, and power that influence differences in school performance.

In the culture of educational systems, the common understanding translates into the current idea that a student's academic career should depend solely on their academic performance given equal opportunities. Because of equal opportunities, as a similar starting point for assessing talent, there is no concern about the luck and failure of those who lack merit. This leads to a deeply unequal society — but, it is important to note, an inequality legitimized by merit: it is the school that is the main institution through which a new aristocracy is created, no longer one of blood or wealth and property, but one of the intelligent.

Thus, meritocracy in education, present in its main institutions, acts to create a new distribution of social privileges, rewarding those who, given equal opportunities, demonstrate talent and merit in their development, so that the established social hierarchy is legitimized by the personal effort to work and hone the gifts and abilities that each person may have.

THE MEANINGS OF DESERT IN JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS

In justice as fairness, Rawls (2001; 2003, p. 104) refers to merit in the discussion focused on the distribution of fundamental social goods (primary goods), which are necessary for any projects undertaken by people within a society. In his considerations in *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls makes

⁷ Although it is not the purpose here, it is worth mentioning that there are excellent works in Portuguese that focus on the discussion and unveiling of meritocratic strategies present in the Brazilian educational system. This is the case of the works of Ione R. Valle, among which the following are worth mentioning: Valle (2013; 2015).

some additions in order to point out three meanings of merit, of which only two are part of the theoretical framework with which his theory of justice operates. Thus, he suggests that there are three meanings of desert: moral desert; legitimate expectation; and institutional desert.⁸

Regarding the first meaning, according to what he wrote in *TJ*, (moral) merit cannot be a determining factor in this distribution since people are not deserving of the natural talents and abilities they may have. In fact, everything that is in some way called talent or natural ability results from arbitrary factors for which people are not responsible. Thus, moral merit belongs to what is determined by comprehensive doctrines, within which there are often opposing conceptions of good. Because of this, moral merit does not achieve the necessary consensus in terms of social justice, so that it cannot be used as a criterion for distribution.

Regarding the second meaning of desert as a legitimate expectation, it should be said that it is something like a substitute for moral merit in matters of distributive justice, since it is appropriate to the political and reasonable dimensions of a well-ordered society, that is, it is consistent with public rules aimed at institutions, not those that belong to individuals and families, even though the latter are a relevant institution. In fact, as Mandle (2015, p. 203-204) explains, many of the common meanings of merit fall under what Rawls calls legitimate expectations. Rawls' understanding (2009) is that a legitimate expectation is established as follows: when a fair or equitable institution is in place, its rules specify certain benefits and burdens to be imposed on participants based on various criteria. Now, based on what the principle of equity establishes, namely that those who voluntarily accept the benefits of participating in fair institutions must comply with their requirements and accept their burdens, legitimate expectations arise as what each person who engages in this institution should expect, complying with its requirements, in accordance with their duties and obligations. Therefore, legitimate expectations refer to the benefits specified by institutional norms that must be satisfied to those who do what their institutional duty and obligation require. Therefore, it can be said that, from the perspective of justice as fairness, even if moral merit is rejected as a distributive standard, a fair scheme gives each person what is due to them according to what that scheme defines (Rawls, 2009, §48, p. 390).

The third meaning of desert is illustrated by games. Rawls (2009) has in mind here, with this reference, the explanation of what is meant when it is said that a team deserves to win rather than lose, making it clear that the losers, in terms of play, behavior, and sportsmanship, also deserved to win and not lose — even though it is not said that the winners did not deserve to lose, but that, based on their performance, both teams could have won as much as they could have lost. This form of merit is already implicit in § 48 of *TJ*, and with it, Rawls means that it is not always the deserving who win. Because of this, in this sense, it becomes possible to understand that citizens who put into practice the public rules of the basic structure of society become deserving, not because of their moral values or social origins, but through institutional public authorities.

Thus, Rawls' theory of justice (2009), presenting itself as an anti-meritocratic perspective, adopts only the last two meanings of merit, which depart from the idea that each person should receive something according to their own effort and moral excellence. In fact, the conception of merit that lies within justice as fairness seems to establish itself as an institutional conception of merit, that is, an institutional counterpart to what is morally merit. If this is the case, from justice as

8 There is a significant difference between desert and meritocracy: while discussions about merit date back to Plato and Aristotle on what each person should receive for what they do, those about meritocracy have as their theoretical framework the work *The Rise of Meritocracy* (2008), by English sociologist Michael Young, published in 1957 — in which he seeks to narrate the formation of a society strictly based on the value of desert and, therefore, constituting a meritocratic society, on the terms that the logic that sustains it is that intelligence, plus effort, result in desert. As is well known, Rawls rejects this notion as a criterion for the distribution of primary goods, such that a well-ordered society, based on justice as fairness, is not a meritocratic society.

fairness, natural talents cannot be placed as distributive sources of primary goods, so they behave as contingents. Now, such a conception rejects merit associated with luck in the natural and social lottery of talents, since no one chooses to come into the world in a particular social class or with specific talents. As Mandle (2015, p. 204) points out, the problem with natural talents is that it would only be possible to determine what would suit each individual who has merit, that is, a specific set of skills, if the institutional context in which that set should be exercised were known — which means that the flourishing of these talents depends on the institutional conditions in which people find themselves. That is why, according to this author, a single set of natural talents and skills would produce very different results when developed and exercised in different institutional contexts.

MERIT, EDUCATION, AND NATURAL TALENTS: EDUCATIONAL EGALITARIANISM

In the best sense, for Rawls (2009), the social dimension of justice must be taken into account, as stated in the second principle of justice: he points to the need for everyone to have an equal opportunity to access the same positions in society, bearing in mind that inequalities are only justified if they mean better conditions for the less favored. Therefore, justice requires that everyone be given their due, however, this due depends not only on the exercise of their natural talents and abilities, but especially on the institutional framework in which this occurs. Hence the importance of this framework of social cooperation being guided by the principles of justice in order for it to be equitable.

In fact, his considerations on merit and natural talents can be seen within the educational context, presenting unquestionably interesting developments. Indeed, on these issues, as Philippe van Parijs (1997, p. 168) explained, “innate talents are not deserved by those who are endowed with them and therefore constitute a morally arbitrary factor of inequality,” so that, for Rawls (2009, §17, p. 121), “no one deserves their greater natural ability or a more favorable starting point in society.” The arguments of Rawls’ theory of justice (2009) thus imply:

- that merit, and here we must take into account that we are talking about educational merit, must be relativized, since, as there is no greater or lesser merit in terms of talents and abilities, it cannot constitute a factor in the distribution of educational goods — as, indeed, are the assessments that determine educational success and failure;
- that educational institutions give rise to legitimate institutional educational expectations as what one can expect if one does what is expected of them in the context of functioning according to public rules;
- that, since education is possibly a good that can be associated with primary goods, it should be distributed according to two principles: first, that education is linked to basic freedoms; and secondly that, on the one hand, it must be equally guaranteed to all with the same natural talents; and, on the other, it must be distributed with a view to improving the position of the less favored, even if this means more investment and resources in terms of education for some than for others. This is because, for Rawls, society is a system of social cooperation guided by public rules of justice that everyone agrees to and obeys.

Now, if these considerations are correct, in the context of social arrangements and fair institutions, such as educational institutions, under the terms of the two principles of justice, it must be said that merit gives rise to legitimate expectations in the institutional setting. This being the case, it seems correct to say that, from a Rawlsian perspective, if merit is rejected in educational matters because individuals are not deserving of the talents, whether natural or social, that they possess, such as the exercise and training of these skills, education will be responsible for acting to reduce the injustices and inequalities arising from this natural inequality in the endowment of talents, since they are morally arbitrary.

If meritocracy is understood according to Barbosa (2003, p. 22), namely, “as a set of values that postulates that individuals’ positions in society should be a consequence of their merit [...], of public recognition of the quality of individual achievements,” it is easy to see that justice as equity presents a society that rejects meritocracy. However, in the field of education, meritocracy is based on academic skills, requiring students to demonstrate aptitudes and abilities as a way of demonstrating success. In this context, merit is expressed as aptitude and talent in educational activities based on minimum content, arranged by an educational system within which there is a curriculum to be satisfied and obeyed.

In light of these considerations, it can be said that, from the rejection of desert — here also educational desert —, contingent elements, among which social class, wealth, and even effort (since it depends on social factors to appear), cannot play a significant role in the distribution of educational goods — such as distribution, selection, and classification schemes. Because of this, Rawls’ requirement of similar *natural talents* for equal equitable opportunities for the flourishing of one’s talents seems obsolete — there is no reliable and precise element that can establish the metric of equal talents, as they depend on the combination of natural talents and social factors. In this scenario, what is consistent with justice as fairness is the defense of educational egalitarianism, that is, the notion that justice, in the field of education, is achieved through equal opportunities for all, admitting, only because of those contingent aspects, more educational investments for some, and not for others, if the expected results benefit those who, due to factors of contingency and social lottery, are in more unfavorable conditions in society.⁹ For Rawls, as expressed by Kymlicka (2006, p. 73), it is clear that no one should benefit from their natural inequality (inequalities would be fair if they satisfied the parameters of the two principles of justice). Since Rawls believes that no one deserves to benefit from their natural talents because of the difference principle, he understands that it is not unfair to allow such benefits when they work to the advantage of those who have been less fortunate in the natural lottery.

In fact, natural talents need to be trained and exercised in order to be developed, which occurs throughout the educational process. To do justice to the individual, it is necessary to ensure equal educational opportunities, through which positions, public functions, social status, culture, among others, will be achieved and realized. Thus, for Rawls, equitable equality of opportunity establishes only one dimension of justice in education, so that social and educational inequalities must also fulfill the condition established by the so-called difference principle: they must be of the greatest benefit to those who are worse off. This implies, again, that the degree of inequality should not become so great as to compromise the self-respect of the less fortunate. The educational distributional implications of Rawls’ theory, therefore, go far beyond the principle of equitable equality of opportunity: when equal opportunity is viewed in conjunction with the difference principle, it becomes clear that Rawls’ theory does not lead to a meritocratic society, because if there are positions of advantage, the justification cannot be that the favored deserve their positions, since their advantages depend largely on natural and social fortune.

⁹ It is true that not everyone is endowed with such social goods. Hence, an educational egalitarianism that rejects merit as a distributive criterion for educational goods is more consistent with the proposal of justice as fairness. In this regard, although it is not explored in depth in the present work, it should be noted that merit would be rejected at two levels by educational institutions (especially schools): on the one hand, the school is conceived as an institution that does not operate through merit, but through legitimate educational expectations (in the sense previously discussed); on the other hand, the distribution of educational goods does not take merit into account, but rather the articulation between the two parts of the second principle of justice. For this reason, even though Rawls does not take education as the central object of his theory, it can be said that the educational problem brings to light significant issues within the theory of justice as fairness (Weitz, 1993, p. 433).

Educational egalitarianism, given the impossibility of determining the similarity of natural talents at the ontological and biological level, is the guarantee of equity and substantially equal opportunities that the principles of justice require. In view of this, in order to avoid a metaphysical discussion, one must defend educational egalitarianism that advocates offering the same education, with high standards of quality assurance, so that the result, for those whose talents are formed in institutional and social contingencies, is the best possible. It is from this that we must say, with Mandle (2015, p. 204, own translation), the following: “justice requires giving people what is due to them. But what is due to them depends not only on the exercise of their talents and abilities, but also on the institutional framework within which this occurs.”

Moreover, the conception of justice as fairness also holds that the justice of the educational system ultimately depends on the justice of the basic structure of society as a whole, and cannot be reduced solely to what is established by the principle of fair equality of opportunity within education. In this framework, it can be said that any particular pattern of relation between social formation, understood in terms of social cooperation, and educational performance — whether just or unjust — will evidently depend on the degree to which society in general, and its distributive pattern in particular, are themselves just or unjust. This is Meuret’s understanding (2008), according to which the meaning of equity complements that of equality of opportunity, with special attention to “the contribution of educational inequalities to maximizing the expectations of the least advantaged: from an internal perspective, the skills and careers of the poorest and weakest students; from an external perspective, the expectations of the poorest members of society” (Meuret, 2008, p. 237-238, my translation). For this reason, it is maintained that Rawls’s theory of justice advances a form of educational egalitarianism, one that understands substantially equal opportunities and education — alongside other social institutions — as means of reducing social inequalities (inequalities that are undeserved and therefore ought to be corrected), even to the point of allowing the creation of inequalities that can be just.

Accordingly, the conclusion reached is that educational egalitarianism is not only more consistent with a just scheme, but also better satisfies the requirements of justice in education as articulated by the principles of justice as fairness. As a final note, it should be borne in mind that, from the perspective of the theory of justice as fairness, no one *deserves* their desert — including in education. In order to prevent the reproduction of inequalities within society, educational egalitarianism thus emerges, as argued, as a demand of justice that is more fully aligned with the normative ideals proposed by the theory of justice as fairness.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Contemporary debates in the educational field, particularly within the domain of educational justice, seek to determine the relationship between effort, talent, natural capacities, and educational opportunities as a basis for establishing inequalities that may be regarded as just, that is, as ways of justifying a fair distribution of educational and social goods, as well as the inequalities that result from it. In this context, the assumption that individuals possess different talents underpins and legitimizes processes of selection and assessment within school practices and evaluations of the justice of educational systems.

Although this work does not pursue the details of this latter point, it has proposed a discussion of natural talents, merit, and education from the perspective of Rawls’s theory of justice as fairness.

¹⁰ It is also worth bearing in mind that Bourdieu’s sociology warned against the reproduction of social inequalities in education, which were perpetuated within educational systems (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1982). On this issue, see Rohling and Valle (2016).

The basic idea advanced here is that the way in which the relationship among these concepts appears in Rawls's theory can contribute significantly to clarifying why merit cannot function as a distributive criterion for educational goods — even within the practices associated with educational institutions themselves. For this reason, the paper was structured so that, in its first part, devoted to the conception of education, defined and associated with the training of natural talents and the skills linked to them, it sought to affirm that the idea of education is oriented by the ethical-political framework of Rawls's work. As argued, this conception provides elements that support, albeit in a minimalist sense, the claim that education is essential to individuals' sense of their own worth and to their integration into society, more than to any other end. It was also established that natural talents, that is, the set of natural abilities and capacities with which individuals are born and which are developed through education, cannot be regarded as legitimate from the standpoint of justice. Indeed, these talents are part of what has been termed the natural lottery and the social lottery — which indicate that talents, whatever their nature, are not only influenced by but also dependent upon social arrangements in order to flourish. Accordingly, education is understood as fundamental to the development of diverse individual talents and abilities, enabling individuals to participate in their society's culture and, thereby, to reinforce their sense of self-worth.

In the second moment, the analysis addressed education from the standpoint of the distributive problem, particularly through the lens of the second principle of justice. Considering that the first part of the second principle stipulates that individuals with similar talents should not, due to social contingencies, be condemned to worse life prospects, the provision of educational opportunities emerges as a means of reducing social inequalities and enabling access to a greater share of primary goods. What becomes evident is that, for Rawls, disparities in talent are not themselves problematic; rather, the problem lies in how institutions respond to this naturally unequal condition. This response takes the form of providing educational opportunities, including those aimed at raising the expectations of the less naturally endowed, since, when taken together, the two parts of the second principle justify greater educational benefits for those who are socially less advantaged within the social scheme.

Finally, in the last part, subdivided into two sections, the issue of merit was examined. It is clear that Rawls empties the notion that individuals morally deserve the rewards of meritocracy on the basis of their talents, a position grounded in how the difference principle addresses inequalities arising from the natural lottery. According to Rawls, there are three senses of merit: moral desert — desert in the strict sense; legitimate expectation; and institutional desert. Of these three, the theory of justice as fairness relates only to the latter two, setting aside the conventional notion of merit and adopting these institutionally mediated counterparts instead. Thus, the claim is not that individuals deserve rewards on the basis of their talents, effort, or excellence. In the second part of this final section, the discussion turned to educational egalitarianism. On the basis of the arguments developed in this text, it seems reasonable to claim that Rawls's theory entails an educational egalitarianism. Indeed, given, on the one hand, that educational opportunities should be equal for all those with similar talents and, on the other, the impracticability of establishing a reliable metric for such talents, especially outside institutional contexts, educational egalitarianism here is expressed in the justification of actions, measures, and public and social policies aimed at reducing social inequalities. Consequently, the basic idea that merit guarantees educational advancement is not consistent with the institutional mediation of talent development or with a commitment to social equality and the reduction of unjust inequalities. For this reason, as components of the institutions that constitute the basic structure of society, educational institutions, in opposition to meritocracy, will be just insofar as they satisfy the two principles of justice.

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