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Comparing value in higher education: the conundrum of commensurability. (0540)

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There is a problem with identifying the assessment of value of higher education. The issue is, I argue, one of *commensurability*. If we want to compare two distinct ‘objects; then we need to find a common frame for measurement. For example, if we want to compare the size of two objects then we can apply the same ‘measuring stick’ to each and a comparison can be made. We can do the same with the capacity or resistivity of two objects. When one comes to ‘apples’ and ‘pears’ there is more of a conundrum: what is to be measured in order for comparison? We might compare weight, size, etc. with little hope of establishing anything of importance. The normal scale for commensurability is money, an arbitrary unit of unclear meaning, but one that allows us to compare apples with pears. This tells us little about the personal value of apples and pears. I might for instance have a clear preference for pears, or I might be making Cider rather than Perry.

I argue that comparisons of different accounts of higher education are similar to ‘comparing apples and pears’. I am not concerned with *who should pay for higher education*, but rather how discourses are shaping how we conceive of its value and the relative value of different conceptions of education. I begin by considering two dominant account of how higher education can be valued. The first denies the possibility of commensurability between different accounts, focussing instead on the preference of the individual. Given, correct information and freedom of choice, then the individual can chose their preferred type of higher education from the range of possible options. There is no commensurable account of value between different types, just expressions of preference. If we ascribe value to one type of higher education over another then we are only expressing the fact that *more people* prefer one type to the other. It is worth noting that, although in reality the one who choses is also the one who pays; there is nothing logical necessary about this arrangement. It is, in principle, possible to focus on the personal preference of students within a system of state funded higher education.

The second model focusses on ‘capital’ in its various forms: social, human and financial. The model argues that, under the right circumstances, one form of capital can be transformed into another form. Thus, one can deploy financial capital in order to develop an individual’s human capital, for example, through appropriate education, and this increased human capital can, in return, be deployed to increase their social and financial capital. The question of the ‘right conditions’ for transformation is critical, but not one I address directly here. How does one compares different types of higher education; what is the ‘measuring stick’ in this case? The rational answer is to value the type that contributes to one’s human capital in order to maximise future social and financial capital and, because all forms of capital can theoretically be transformed into another, we can say the ‘measuring stick’ is ‘capital’. The value of higher education is therefore measured (and only measured) in relation to the increase in capital that it provides to, and for, the individual. The contribution of a particular type of education to capital will vary as the social and economic conditions vary. Thus, the more valued types of

higher education, at any point in time, are those which provide the greatest increase in that human capital which can be transformed. The courses that are aligned to labour market needs, and those related to higher financial returns are thus considered more valuable, as are those located in 'elite' institutions which increase social capital.

There are critiques of both accounts (see Fukuyama's, 1999¹, criticisms in what is otherwise a positive account of social capital), but what is at stake is that the search for commensurable scales of comparison which privilege particular discourses about the value of higher education. They focus attention on either the *personal preference* of the applicant, or *the social and financial value* gained through that choice. What then of other, older, conceptions of the value of higher education, those that argue for the intrinsic value of education for the 'human soul'? Let us consider an interpretation of the well know example of 'Plato's cave' (Plato, 2002) ².

In this allegory, an escaped prisoner brought up in chains in a cave recognises through a painful process that all they thought they knew was falsehood and illusion. This painful process enables them to see the world free of illusion. It concludes by pointing out that if that prisoner re-enters the cave and seeks to free others they would be bound to fight him, thinking him deranged by his experience. Education is, thus on Plato's account, a painful transition from illusion and falsehood to revelation; one which the student is not naturally inclined to undertake (and in fact fight against). It is, however, a journey that affirms the humanity of the student and one that is *intrinsically* valuable. 'Measuring sticks' by which to compare the value of different types of intrinsically valuable education are not self-evident. Such a 'measuring stick' requires, I argue, a shared, robust conception of what it means to be human.

I conclude by arguing that this is the central issue in the valuing of higher education. This lack has led to superficial conceptions of humans as 'personal choosers' or 'capital minimisers' and nothing more. Seeing higher education as constitutive of our humanity requires us to be clearer about as to what that view of humanity entails. I conclude by briefly considering two such substantive accounts promoted in contemporary educational debate: character education ground in Aristotle, and Biesta's (2016³) account grounded in Hannah Arendt.

1 Fukuyama, F. (1999) Social Capital and Civil Society, Paper IMF Conference on Second generation Reforms

2 Plato, 2002 (Republic (514a–520a) online <http://idph.net/conteudos/ebooks/republic.pdf>

3 Biesta, G. (2016) The Beautiful Risk of Education. Abingdon: Routledge