

2018 Research Week Proposal

Title – Principles and Consequences in a Virtue Ethics Analysis of Affirmative Action

Program of Study – B.A. in Philosophy

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Abstract: In this paper, I evaluate educational affirmative action from the framework of virtue ethics. In doing so, I consider the *principles* behind affirmative action as well as its *consequences* because a perfectly virtuous person will act per just principles but will also be concerned with the consequences of her actions. An attempt to restore justice that utilizes a mechanism *known to be ineffective* is not truly an attempt to restore justice and so is not virtuous. Therefore, if affirmative action is principally justified, a complete virtue ethical analysis will still ask, “Do we know if it works?”

Because there is empirical evidence that parental education significantly influences a child’s education, wrongfully denying a person educational opportunities will most likely reduce her children’s academic success. While it is not possible to make restitution to many of those from whom educational opportunities were stolen in the past, it is possible to make restitution to their children who are harmed by this theft. Affirmative action is principally justified insofar as it attempts to make restitution for the theft of educational opportunities which has been transmitted across generations. However, the question of whether this attempt is successful remains. Thomas Sowell argues persuasively that Affirmative Action is not effective, but it is not clear that he evaluates all the relevant measures—he considers students’ performance relative to their peers,

but not their absolute level of educational attainment. Even if affirmative action does not improve students' performance relative to their peers, it *may* still increase their level of education and thus prevent the transmission of educational theft to the next generation. Thus, I conclude that affirmative action is principally justified by past wrongs, but that further research is needed to validate its effectiveness. Specifically, the following questions must be addressed:

1. Are low-performing college graduate's children more educationally successful than the children of low-performing students who did not go to college?
2. Are the children of those who attended but did not graduate college more educationally successful than the children of comparable persons who did not attend college?

Answering these questions will help evaluate whether affirmative action prevents the transmission of educational theft even if it does not increase students' performance relative to their peers.