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Common Error No. 34 [1]

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34. "Education is a right, not something to be bought and sold."

Education is bought and sold. It costs money to produce, because resources and personnel have to be allocated to its supply. The question is not whether it should be bought and sold, but whether government should have a monopoly on the transaction.

Education has to be paid for, and people have to be directed to the production of it. This can be done, albeit inefficiently, by having government decide on the appropriate level, and by levying sufficient taxation to pay for it. Education then takes its place in the queue of demands on public funds. Extra allocation depends on political pressure, and what level of taxation the government thinks will be tolerated. It also depends on the level of public outcry at the standards which the state manages to achieve.

Alternatively it can be provided in a market way, with people spending on it what they think it is worth, and to the level which they think is advantageous. People engage in supply activity to meet, and even profit from, that demand. A wide range of choices is available for a range of widely different personal circumstances. In both cases it is a commodity, not a right. People have a scale of priorities; they have to balance how much they care to spend on housing, how much to other things such as consumer goods and holidays, and how much to personal services such as health and education. This is done very diffusely and imperfectly through the political process, where individual preferences have to be averaged.

People may decide that in a humane society, everyone capable of benefitting from education should have access to it at appropriate levels. Instead of being done through mass state provision, this can be achieved by ensuring that affordable school places are widely available, and by helping where necessary through vouchers or assisted places.

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