A Response to DeFaveri

Goldwin J. Emerson
university of western ontario

It is always rather flattering to have one's ideas taken seriously enough to be commented on, albeit critically, by a respected colleague. I am grateful to Professor DeFaveri for his attention to detail and his accuracy in presenting my ideas.

In paragraph five, DeFaveri attempts to bring some clarity to the egalitarian position by introducing the concept of "equality of concern," yet he recognizes that some students will need much more care, consideration, work, time, and effort than will other students. Hence, his notion of "equality of concern" will be manifested in such unequal ways that a new question arises. Is DeFaveri really talking about equality of concern, care, and consideration, or is he implying that some students need more care and more concern than others in order to be treated justly? If equality of concern means an uneven distribution of care and consideration in its practical application, then "equality" of concern may be a poor choice of words since it introduces one more step to be dealt with before facing the inevitable egalitarian paradox. In the same paragraph DeFaveri quotes Tawney, who appears to support my original position that "the more anxiously, indeed, a society endeavours to secure equality of consideration for all its members, the greater will be differentiation of treatment. . . ." If, as DeFaveri seems to argue, equality of care, concern, and consideration really means treating students as though more care and consideration is to be expended upon some than upon others, perhaps the egalitarians need to seek out a term that represents their position better than does "equality."

In paragraph seven, DeFaveri launches into a different position on egalitarianism when he considers that one of the desired results of schooling ought to be "a certain minimum attainment for all." In order to be consistent with this earlier idealism expressed in paragraph five it seems that he would need to recognize that a satisfactory minimum attainment for a mentally slower student will not be satisfactory at all for a more gifted student. Hence the idea of a certain minimum attainment based on "common curriculum" becomes meaningless if indeed it is to be applied differently to different students according to their needs.

By implication, DeFaveri suggests in his paragraph ten that my position on egalitarianism will result in "a Procrustean bed" approach towards

students. However, he makes no mention of my discussion regarding class size, curriculum, teaching, competition, and teacher education (pp. 56-57) in which I abhor such a Procrustean bed approach. In the same paragraph he elaborates on various meanings of the word "liberal." It is difficult to determine in what way he believes the notion of liberalism is related to the topic of egalitarianism other than that the meanings of both terms change and at times become imprecise.

On a more positive note, I commend DeFaveri for his helpful list of four points (paragraph eleven) in which he sets out some of the typical features of egalitarian thought. Nevertheless, his statement that "the egalitarian tends to think that no child at birth deserves better chances than any other child" (point two) is puzzling. This statement appears to fly in the face of biological and mental differences that are a fact of human existence even prior to birth. In point four, DeFaveri states "that each should be allowed to flourish in his own way." This suggests a much more laissez-faire approach than what is indicated in order to rectify the condition he decries later on in point four when he states "it is unfair for the rich to have greater opportunities to become educated than the poor."

In his concluding remarks DeFaveri again appears somewhat contradictory. On one hand he states, "It may not be possible to announce ahead of time just how he will strike a balance between the various elements of his [the egalitarian's] thought. . . ." On the other hand, he confidently asserts that this judgment about egalitarianism "can be stated in coherent terms and directed toward non-paradoxical ends." Finally DeFaveri concludes that "Emerson's egalitarian . . . is a straw man, unrepresentative of serious egalitarian thought." I believe that the great variety of views held on the subject of equality and the extreme difficulty in describing equality with precision indicates that it is not a simple straw man. Certainly it is not a straw man to the teacher who daily faces the question of what is just and fair treatment for students with varying degrees of needs and abilities.

Finally, I am grateful to Professor DeFaveri for his critical analysis of my paper and for his insights into a longstanding discussion on an interesting educational topic.

Goldwin J. Emerson is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario N6G 1G7.