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# What is a positional good? Recovering Hirsch's insights

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## Abstract

'Positional goods', a term coined by Fred Hirsch, is an important concept in economics, social sciences and philosophy; however, it is used in different ways. This paper recovers Hirsch's concept of positional goods as scarce goods that are fixed or near-fixed in supply and argues for the usefulness of this concept. Hirsch's concept may have explanatory power beyond the concept used by most economists – that of Robert Frank. Moreover, Hirsch's concept is more explanatorily basic and useful than the concept used by most philosophers – that of Brighouse and Swift.

**Keywords:** positional goods; fixed supply goods; supply-inelastic goods; Fred Hirsch; social limits to growth

## 1. Introduction

'Positional goods' has become an important concept in economics, social sciences and philosophy since the term was first coined by Fred Hirsch in his book *Social Limits to Growth* (Hirsch 1976, hereafter SLG). To give some examples, economists use the concept to analyse and diagnose overconsumption of certain types of goods, overwork and under-saving, to explain Easterlin's paradox, and to argue for consumption taxes (e.g. Frank 2008, 2020; Feltovich and Ejebu 2014). Philosophers use the concept to make normative claims about, for example, distributive justice, justice in education, global justice and social status (e.g. Brighouse and Swift 2006; Ypi 2012; Ben-Shahar 2016; Halliday 2016; Cass 2023). However, Hirsch never provided a clear and succinct definition of the term he coined, and the term 'positional goods' is currently being used and defined in very different ways by different scholars.<sup>1</sup> Hence, it is natural to ask: what did Hirsch really mean when he

<sup>1</sup>I document some of this variation in what follows. Drissen (2023) and Schneider (2007) also observe and document some of this variation.

introduced the concept? And are some of the concepts currently in use better or more useful than others for the purpose of future research?<sup>2</sup>

In response, in this paper, I will do the following. First, I will recover Hirsch's original concept and the core observation or insight he intended the concept to track. For Hirsch, positional goods are scarce goods that are fixed or near-fixed in supply, at least without a decrease in quality, at least in the short or medium term. His examples include goods such as Old Masters, beautiful landscapes, suburban land, status symbols, authentic tourist destinations and leadership jobs. Second, I will discuss the most influential definitions in use in contemporary literature in light of the insights gained from the study of Hirsch's original concept. I focus on the positional goods concept of Robert H. Frank, which is currently the most used concept in economics and social sciences, and the concept of Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, which is the most used concept in contemporary philosophical scholarship on positional goods.

The discussion will reveal that both the currently most frequently used concepts differ in significant ways from Hirsch's original concept, as well as from one another. Moreover, Hirsch's original concept tracks insights that literature using both alternative concepts overlooks and can therefore be used to formulate novel and interesting hypotheses and analyses. I will argue that Hirsch's concept can explain competitive dynamics beyond those explained by Frank's concept and therefore has explanatory potential that research in economics and social sciences using Frank's concept has not yet tapped into. With regard to Brighouse and Swift's concept, the explanatory value of applying Hirsch's original concept may be even greater, as Hirsch's concept picks out a property that is more explanatorily basic and allows for more intuitive and useful analyses of social and normative phenomena of the kind that Brighouse and Swift are interested in. This includes the resources to explain in a straightforward way why Brighouse and Swift's levelling down claim about positional goods is false.<sup>3</sup> Hence, Hirsch's original concept has much to contribute to studies of both descriptive and normative questions that contemporary scholarship on 'positional goods' seeks to address. I also provide some considerations on concept use in future scholarship, arguing for using the concept 'positional goods' along with more self-explanatory terminology to limit downsides of variation in concept use and facilitate new insights on the many interesting questions contemporary economists, social scientists and philosophers study as questions about 'positional goods'.

## 2. Recovering Hirsch's Concept

Hirsch's declared project in SLG is to provide explanations for what he takes to be three puzzling tendencies. The first is what he calls the 'paradox of affluence', i.e. the enduring attraction of the ideal of economic growth, despite its disappointing results. The second is the 'distributional compulsion', i.e. the tension between strong concerns with distribution and the rival idea of making everyone better off by

<sup>2</sup>This is a 'conceptual engineering' question (cf. Cappelen 2018, 2020; Cappelen and Plunkett 2020; Chalmers 2020).

<sup>3</sup>This is a widely (but not universally) accepted claim in contemporary philosophical scholarship on positional goods (see references below).

producing a larger output. The third, ‘reluctant collectivism’, is a trend towards more collective provision despite a social ethos emphasizing individual freedom (SLG: 1). Hirsch describes how several mechanisms contribute to explaining these puzzles, and his new concept of ‘positional goods’ plays an important role in these explanations.

Unfortunately, Hirsch never provides a clear and succinct definition of ‘positional goods’ (as Schneider 2007: 60 also notes), and this probably at least partly explains the ensuing absence of coordination around a shared definition (more on this below). I will argue that it is nevertheless possible to recover Hirsch’s concept of ‘positional goods’, or at least the concept it is most reasonable to attribute to him. But as there is no canonical definition to start from, and a significant number of definitions in use attributed to Hirsch or presented as related to his concept, this will inevitably involve some exegesis focusing on how Hirsch describes and uses the concept in SLG.

The closest Hirsch ever comes to giving a definition of ‘positional goods’ is arguably a passage where he describes a distinction between ‘two divisions of the economy’, namely the ‘material economy’ and the ‘positional economy’, as follows:<sup>4</sup>

The material economy is defined as output amenable to continued increase in productivity per unit of labor input: it is Harrod’s democratic wealth. The material economy embraces production of physical goods as well as such services as are receptive to mechanization or technological innovation without deterioration in quality as it appears to the consumer. . . . The positional economy, which is the basis of Harrod’s oligarchic wealth, relates to all aspects of goods, services, work positions, and other social relationships that are either (1) scarce in some absolute or socially imposed sense or (2) subject to congestion or crowding through more extensive use. (SLG: 27)

In this passage, Hirsch maps the distinction between the material and the positional economy onto two other distinctions. One is a distinction between output ‘amenable to continued increase in productivity’ on the one hand, and on the other, goods and services that are one of two: either ‘scarce in some absolute or socially imposed sense’ or ‘subject to congestion or crowding’. The other is a distinction drawn by Sir Roy Harrod (1958) between what he calls ‘democratic wealth’ and ‘oligarchic wealth’. Both distinctions are explicated in the chapter that precedes this passage (i.e. in SLG: Ch. 2). Thus, to understand Hirsch’s concept of positional goods, we need to get clear about the content of these two distinctions.

I will start with the distinction that turns on the possibility of increasing productivity and different forms of scarcity or crowding. The point here is not that some goods are scarce, and some are not: as Hirsch notes, all economic goods are scarce in the sense that demand exceeds supply, and this is what makes them

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Schneider (2007: 61) and Drissen (2023: 415). However, when Drissen (2023: 415) explicates what Hirsch means by this distinction, she, perhaps tellingly, does not cite Hirsch, but rather provides the definition of positional goods from Matthews’ review of SLG (Matthews 1977: 574; I comment on this definition below). Hirsch first uses the term ‘positional goods’ in the summary of his argument in the introduction of SLG (on p. 11) but does not explain what he means by the term there.

economic goods in the first place (SLG: 22). However, many goods are scarce, but also continuously increase in supply over time with technological and other innovations, as Hirsch describes the 'material economy' in the quoted passage. As Hirsch also puts it, 'regular economic scarcity merely reflects the limits on contemporary availabilities' (SLG: 22). Thus, what Hirsch calls 'standard economic goods' are subject to 'regular scarcity', increase in availability over time due to technological and other innovations, and will typically be available to significantly more people in the near future than they are today.

The cited passage contrasts this regular scarcity of standard economic goods characteristic of the material economy with what Hirsch calls 'absolute' and 'social' senses of scarcity and with congestion or crowding. These are terms and phenomena he has introduced earlier (SLG: 19–23). 'Absolute physical scarcity' is a quite straightforward notion, it means that there are 'physical limits to growth', i.e. physical limitations that prevent creating more of the goods in question. The examples Hirsch gives are natural landscapes and Old Masters (SLG: 19–21).

Social scarcity is a less transparent notion, but as the term suggests, the supply or enjoyment of socially scarce goods is limited by factors that are 'social' in nature. Hirsch describes two kinds of social scarcity. The first is what he calls 'direct social scarcity' or 'pure social scarcity' (SLG: 20–21). Goods are scarce in this way if increasing their supply changes their characteristics such that satisfaction from owning or using the good (or a certain version or amount of it) is reduced (SLG: 20). Typical cases are goods that are enjoyed for their scarcity, such as status symbols, and satisfaction derived from relative position (i.e. from 'being above' others). When the satisfaction a good brings decreases with wider availability there is a 'social limit' to how many can enjoy it, at least without a decrease in the quality of the good or the satisfaction it brings. Hirsch explains the existence of this kind of social limit by 'psychological motives' such as 'envy, emulation and pride' (SLG: 20–21).

The second type of social scarcity Hirsch describes is what he calls 'incidental social scarcity' (SLG: 21). Goods that are scarce in this way are enjoyed for their intrinsic characteristics, not for their scarcity or for conferring relative position, but the satisfaction one can get from them is nevertheless affected by other people in other ways. Hirsch mentions crowding and congestion as factors whereby the use of a good by other people can reduce the quality of the good or the enjoyment it brings for each user, even if the properties of the good otherwise remain the same. His examples of congestion include both physical congestion, as in traffic and urban areas, and 'social congestion', as in shared leadership, which he takes to be less enjoyable than individual leadership (SLG: 22).<sup>5</sup> Another evocative example given later is 'undiscovered tourist destinations': when a certain number of people succeed in finding their way to such a destination, it will no longer be what they were looking for – even if the place itself may be just as beautiful as before (SLG: 37–38). The fact that crowding or congestion itself can reduce the quality of or satisfaction available from a good in this way amounts to a second kind of 'social limit' on how many people can enjoy it, at least without a decrease in quality (SLG: 21–22).

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<sup>5</sup>Observe that Hirsch here thus treats congestion and crowding as a type of social scarcity, even if he in the passage cited above seems to treat these as distinct from social scarcity.

Thus, both goods subject to ‘incidental’ and ‘direct’ social scarcity decrease in quality as more people access the goods. However, the mechanisms whereby this happens differ. For direct social scarcity, it is the increase in the supply of the good, i.e. the reduction of the scarcity, which reduces the value of the good. For incidental social scarcity, it is the increased use of a good enjoyed for its own intrinsic characteristics that reduces the value of the good. In other words, increased supply in the first case, and increased use in the latter, change a good into an inferior version of that good.

Physical and social scarcity overlap to a large degree, as Hirsch also notes. Physical scarcity is often what makes it possible for a good to work as a status symbol and hence be an object of pure social scarcity. Conversely, social factors like fashion play a role in determining what is desired, which in turn gives rise to new physical scarcities when items that were previously not in high demand come to be (SLG: 21).

Given that Hirsch intends his term ‘positional goods’ to cover goods subject to both physical and social scarcity, as shown in the passage cited above, what matters for the purpose of identifying Hirsch’s concept of positional goods is, therefore, what physical and social scarcity have in common. We can now see that this commonality is that goods subject to physical or social scarcity (unlike goods subject to ‘regular economic scarcity’) are subject to limits on increasing supply, at least without deterioration in their quality or how much satisfaction they provide. The limits may be absolute such that supply is absolutely fixed, as in the case of Old Masters, but this need not be the case, even if Hirsch may not be perfectly consistent in recognizing this.<sup>6</sup> Near-absolute limits on increasing supply are sufficient to give rise to the kinds of social phenomena Hirsch is interested in (more on these below), and several of Hirsch’s own examples are goods for which supply is not perfectly fixed. For example, building a few more houses need not detract from the suburban qualities of a neighbourhood. Another relevant qualifier is that, in some cases discussed by Hirsch, the limits in question are limits in the short or medium term that may be overcome in the long term. For example, we can build a new road to ease congestion or engage in rewilding to create more nature. Physical and social scarcity thus represent different kinds of limits on how many people can enjoy a good (see also SLG: 3–4), or different reasons why the supply of a certain good will be fixed or near-fixed. This allows us to state Hirsch’s concept of positional goods as follows:

**Positional goods (Hirsch’s concept):** Positional goods are scarce goods that are fixed or near-fixed in supply, at least without a decrease in quality, at least in the short or medium term.

The core of the concept is thus that positional goods are fixed or near-fixed in supply.<sup>7</sup> Implicit in the supply being (near) fixed is also that good substitutes that

<sup>6</sup>At an early point in his discussion, Hirsch notes that low elasticity of supply together with low substitutability is sufficient to give rise to the phenomenon in which he is interested (SLG: 18). Elsewhere, however, he contrasts growth in the material economy with what he describes as the ‘stationary’ positional economy (SLG: 26).

<sup>7</sup>See also the effectively near-identical definitions given by Heath (2022: 121–22; 2024: 299) that I discuss in more detail below.

are not fixed in supply are not readily available, for if so, the fixed supply of the first good would not have much practical significance (SLG: 18–20). The two qualifiers at the end of the definition specify two important ways in which supply of a good need not be absolutely or permanently fixed for the good to qualify as one of Hirsch's positional goods. Finally, the definition also specifies that positional goods are scarce, which matters because many things may ultimately be fixed in supply (e.g. air, seawater), but this does not have economic importance unless the good is also scarce (i.e. demand for the good exceeds supply).<sup>8</sup> The vagueness of 'near-fixed' means that Hirsch's concept of 'positional goods' may be somewhat vague, as many concepts are, but the point is that when the supply of a good is completely fixed or close to being so, this is significant for the reasons Hirsch gives (and that I return to below).

Positional goods thus understood are *positional* in the sense that access to these goods typically depends on one's position in the distribution of some other, instrumental good, typically income and wealth (but e.g. education and qualifications in the case of the positional good of attractive jobs) (SLG: 4–7, 34–36, 49, 102–105, 113–114, 150–151, 169–170, 176). As supply is (near) fixed, it cannot expand to meet increases in demand. Thus, if there are three attractive jobs open, and many more applicants, the three jobs will go to the three applicants ranked highest in the distribution of qualifications. If there are two available housing units in an attractive neighbourhood, they will go to the two parties who can (or are willing to) pay the most, and so on. The close connection between position in income and wealth (or some other instrumental good) and access to the goods in question is presumably why Hirsch chose the term 'positional goods' for this class of goods.

I will next examine how this definition fits with the second distinction Hirsch uses to explain the distinction between the material and the positional economy, namely Harrod's distinction between 'democratic wealth' and 'oligarchic wealth'. Harrod makes this distinction in a short essay in which he discusses whether economic growth can give rise to general satiety (Harrod 1958; discussed in SLG: 23–26). 'Oligarchic wealth' covers 'types of satisfaction available to a minority that could never in any circumstances whatever be made available to the majority of people' (Harrod 1958: 208). This includes goods that are too scarce for there to be enough of them for everyone, such as 'to live in the choicest part of New York', or 'fine old masterpieces', and labour-intensive goods such as mansions and private parks that require employing a large amount of personal services (Harrod 1958: 208–9). Democratic wealth, on the other hand, covers those goods and satisfactions that can be made available to all (Harrod 1958: 208).

In the passage cited initially, Hirsch seems to treat the distinction between democratic and oligarchic wealth as identical to his own distinction between regular and physical or social scarcity.<sup>9</sup> The distinctions are clearly closely related, as physical and social limits on expanding supply are typically what make it impossible to make the goods in Harrod's oligarchic wealth available to all, but they are not

<sup>8</sup>Thus, for example, land on earth is finite in supply, but only in some locations is it also scarce.

<sup>9</sup>Strictly speaking he asserts that the material economy 'is Harrod's democratic wealth', whereas the positional economy 'is the basis for Harrod's oligarchic wealth'.

perfectly overlapping. The fact that increasing the supply of a good subject to regular scarcity currently does not run into hard constraints does not guarantee that this good can actually be made available to all. On the other hand, some of Hirsch's examples of social scarcity, such as roads currently affected by congestion, are goods that could be available to all in the long run. I therefore suggest that we note the similarities between the concept of 'positional goods' stated in terms of fixed or near-fixed supply and Harrod's oligarchic wealth as another reason to think that the concept above is on the right track with regards to what Hirsch has in mind, even if the concepts are not identical or exactly coextensive, as Hirsch seems to suggest.

Thus far, I have focused on exegetically recovering Hirsch's concept of 'positional goods' based on how he introduces the concept in Chapter 2 and the beginning of Chapter 3 of SLG. I will conclude the exegetical work with a short examination of how Hirsch then goes on to use the concept analytically, which will provide further support for the definition reconstructed above.

Hirsch identifies and describes three allocation processes that can take place when an excess number of people want to access a positional good (SLG: 28–54). We have already seen the first one: if there are no constraints on access, the good may become *crowded or congested*, and satisfaction from the good deteriorates. Hirsch's main case is suburbanization, where a suburb both crowds and has its access to the country cut off by another suburb at the periphery, rendering it a less agreeable place to live (SLG: 36–41). Second, if there are constraints on access, such as zoning regulations and property rights, allocation in a market economy effectively takes the form of an *auction* with many more bidders than goods available. As described above, capacity to acquire the positional good is then determined by one's relative position in the distribution of income and wealth, where only those with economic means above the price set in the auction can access the good. Hirsch's main example here is ownership of leisure land (SLG: 32–36). Third, discussing the case of leadership jobs, Hirsch identifies a mechanism of harder *screening*, and an associated *lengthening of the obstacle course* one must pass through in order to attain these jobs: as more people enter the competition for leadership jobs and pursue longer educations, more effort, time and money must be spent on the education necessary to attain jobs that were previously attainable with a lower educational level (SLG: 41–51). Both the auction and lengthening of obstacle course processes can be processes of 'positional competition', i.e. of competing for positional goods by competing for position in the distribution of an instrumental good that gives access to this good, such as education or money (see esp. SLG: 52–54).

Hirsch describes competition for positional goods as a 'zero-sum game' (SLG: 52), and this has since come to be taken for granted as a fact about positional goods (see Drissen 2023 and references there).<sup>10</sup> However, while it is correct that it is only possible to obtain a good that is absolutely fixed in supply by outbidding someone else, or taking it away from someone, this is not the case for goods that are near-fixed in supply. It is, therefore, worth noting that the description of positional competition as zero-sum is not precisely correct, even if it may be fine as a rough description.

<sup>10</sup>Pagano (1999: 63) even defines positional goods as zero-sum goods.



A central point for Hirsch regarding positional competition and the three allocation processes he describes is that these tend to be wasteful, or negative-sum – indeed, this is arguably one of the main points in what follows (e.g. SLG: 52–54, 66–67, 75–76, 102–105, 109, 172–173, 183, 187). This is most obvious in the competitive ‘lengthening of the obstacle course’ process, where people end up spending more effort competing for the same jobs. However, the auction and crowding processes can also be socially wasteful. As auction prices increase, people may find themselves in a similar lengthening obstacle-course dynamic where more effort and sacrifice of leisure is needed to obtain the relative income level and purchasing power that could be obtained with less sacrifice earlier. This is what Hirsch calls ‘the rat race at the societal level’ (SLG: 75–77). Both the lengthening obstacle course and crowding processes involve a ‘tyranny of small decisions’ whereby many individually rational decisions give rise to an outcome that is worse than what people expected and took as the basis for their decisions, and worse than what could have been achieved with more coordination (SLG: 31, 39–41).

The examination of Hirsch’s analysis of allocation processes and competition for positional goods thus identifies three properties of these goods:

- (1) Increase in demand leads to (a) crowding or (b) competition.
- (2) In cases of competition for positional goods (1b) access to the positional good depends on one’s position in the distribution of some other *instrumental good*.
- (3) Such competition or crowding tends to be socially wasteful relative to an outcome that can be achieved with coordination.

All of this fits well with understanding positional goods as scarce goods that are fixed or near-fixed in supply, and (2) here corresponds to what is presumably the reason why Hirsch called these goods ‘positional goods’.

I will next examine how conceiving of positional goods as scarce goods that are fixed or near-fixed in supply fits with the overall narrative of SLG, including Hirsch’s explanations of his three puzzles. Hirsch describes a development where growth in the material economy has led to widespread satisfaction of basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, etc. In consequence, desires expand from nonpositional goods that satisfy basic needs to goods that were previously beyond the horizon of the many, and which tend to be positional goods, such as suburban homes, leisure land, superior jobs, status symbols, etc. (SLG: 26, 28, 65–67). Because these goods are subject to physical and social limits to growth that are eventually reached, these goods cannot be made available to the many who now desire them. Instead, the processes of congestion and positional competition described above ensue, which lead to social waste as the quality of congesting goods declines while people invest ever more effort in zero-sum competition for relative position in order to access these goods. Thus, growth gives rise to frustration, rather than satisfaction.

Hirsch’s explanation of the first puzzle, the paradox of affluence, is thus that we remain committed to the ideal of growth, despite its disappointing results, because we fail to realise that some goods are positional goods subject to limits on supply and that for this reason, growth cannot deliver on its promise to make everyone better off (SLG: 175). As long as growth was making everyone better off, individual



interests were largely in harmony, and distributive issues about who benefitted, and by how much, were less important (SLG: 174–176). However, as this cannot be the case in the positional economy, distributive conflicts are returning with force, threatening to ‘displace Smithian harmony by Hobbesian strife’ (SLG: 185). This contributes to explaining Hirsch’s second and third puzzles, the focus on redistribution and collective provision in societies ostensibly committed to individual freedom and making everyone better off through growth (SLG: 175–176).

We have now assembled two kinds of support for the interpretation of Hirsch’s concept of positional goods as scarce goods that are (near) fixed in supply: first, it is supported by the sections of SLG that introduce the term, and second, it fits with how Hirsch actually uses the concept in his analyses of positional competition, his three puzzles, and in the overall narrative of SLG. A third source of support is that Hirsch’s own examples of positional goods all fit this definition. In addition to the goods mentioned above, such as Old Masters, status symbols, leisure land, leadership jobs, and ‘undiscovered’ tourist destinations, these include goods such as outstanding scenery, national monuments, the foreshore that gives access to the sea, and (elite) education (SLG: 149, 186).<sup>11</sup> Overall, I find that this adds up to solid evidence that the concept presented above successfully reconstructs Hirsch’s concept of ‘positional goods’.

I have found it necessary to accumulate such strong support for this concept because, as we will see below, it differs from both the concepts that are currently most frequently used, namely that of Robert Frank in economics and the social sciences, and that of Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift in philosophy. The reconstruction of Hirsch’s concept of positional goods presented here is therefore novel relative to how the term he coined tends to be used today, but it should be observed that it is not entirely idiosyncratic. Economist Robin Matthews in his review of SLG renders Hirsch’s concept in terms of access depending on relative income, and supply being fixed (or not expanding with general economic growth), and thus reads Hirsch very similarly to what I argue for here (Matthews 1977: 574). Moreover, philosopher Joseph Heath describes positional goods as ‘fixed or extremely inelastic in supply’ (Heath 2024: 299, see also 2022: 121–22). As a definition, this is effectively identical to the core of the recovered definition from Hirsch, as goods that are near-fixed in supply will be extremely inelastic in supply for this reason.<sup>12</sup> This also means that it is possible to define Hirsch’s positional goods in terms of perfect or near-perfect supply-inelasticity instead of fixed or near-fixed supply if one prefers this terminology.

I will leave the examination of Hirsch’s concept here – the full account is found in SLG. In the next section, I will examine the concepts that are most frequently used in

<sup>11</sup>Education may be the good on this list which least obviously fits the reconstructed definition, as at least after a certain point – which may now have been reached in many advanced economies – education can expand without it significantly decreasing in value by conferring less advantage in the labour market, because it is already so widespread. Before this point was reached, however, any education would confer significant competitive advantage, and this is still the case for elite education (see also the discussion in SLG: 48–49). In virtue of being an instrumental good that is near-fixed in supply, elite education is thus both a positional good and an instrumental good to access other positional goods.

<sup>12</sup>To my knowledge, Heath is also the only scholar who currently uses the concept ‘positional goods’ as Hirsch did.

the contemporary literature on positional goods, and which differ significantly from Hirsch's original concept.

### 3. Other Influential Positional Goods Concepts: The Importance of Hirsch's Insight

This section examines the positional goods concepts most frequently used in contemporary scholarship in light of the study of Hirsch's concept above and the insights gained there. While many different concepts are currently in use, I focus on the two definitions that are most influential, namely that of Robert H. Frank in economics and social sciences, and that of Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift in contemporary philosophy. I find that both these concepts differ from Hirsch's and that Hirsch's concept can contribute novel insights to the study of positional goods in all these disciplines, with particularly revisionary implications for Brighouse and Swift's concept.

#### 3.1 Frank's concept of positional goods

It is natural to start with the positional goods concept of economist Robert H. Frank, who has probably contributed more to scholarship on positional goods than anyone else (e.g. Frank 1985a, 1985b, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2020; Frank and Sunstein 2001). In his most recent book, Frank introduces the concept of 'positional goods' as follows:

The late British economist Fred Hirsch coined the term *positional good* to describe things that derive their value primarily from their scarcity rather than their absolute characteristics. ... I will use Hirsch's term to mean a good whose value depends relatively heavily on how it compares with other goods in the same category. ... Similarly, I will use the term *nonpositional good* to describe one whose value depends relatively little on how it compares with other goods in the same category. (Frank 2020: 131, italics in original, paragraph break omitted)

Moreover, Frank has been fairly consistent in how he has defined positional goods throughout his scholarship (cf. esp. the earliest definitions in Frank 1985a: 7, 1985b: 101).<sup>13</sup> Given the importance of Frank's contributions to the study of positional goods, it is unsurprising that when economists and other social scientists use this term, they often use one of Frank's definitions, often citing from his earlier work.<sup>14</sup>

'Positional goods' as Frank uses the term thus refers to goods in a category for which how we evaluate or value a specific item within it depends relatively heavily on comparisons to other items in that category. The term can thus be used for

<sup>13</sup>Compare also, for example, Frank (2008: 1777) and Frank and Sunstein (2001: 337). On some occasions Frank gives a definition that is worded quite differently, but still picks out roughly the same class of goods, and seems intended to do so (Frank 2005: 137; 2008: 1778; 2011: 70). A somewhat different definition is suggested in Frank (1985a: 141). In one place, and only there, to my knowledge, Frank defines positional goods in a way that partly resembles the reconstructed definition of Hirsch, as he there gives a disjunctive definition where the first disjunct is that these are 'inherently in short supply' (Frank 2012: 221).

<sup>14</sup>See for example Kim (2019: 29), Antinyan *et al.* (2020: 1–2) and Durst (2021: 747).

particular goods or items within such categories, and for such categories of goods as a whole. Frank's examples include particular items such as a fancy diamond, a good school, or a nice suit, subcategories such as top jobs, and whole goods categories such as housing and 'observables' (Frank 1985a: 7, 1985b; 2008: 1777, 1778; 2020: 130–31). A more self-explanatory term for the type of goods Frank's concept picks out may be 'comparatively evaluated goods', or 'comparative goods' for short. The vagueness of 'depends relatively heavily' is intentional: often, goods are valued both for their absolute properties and for how they do comparatively (Frank 2020: 131). The point of Frank's concept is that when the comparative aspect is weighty enough this has implications for economic behaviour, which it is valuable to have a concept for tracking. These include giving rise to suboptimal spending patterns such as wasteful 'positional competitions' in which an individual's spending on comparative goods, such as fancier suits or larger houses, yields little to no welfare benefit because these goods fail to compare favourably when others spend in the same way (e.g. Frank 1985a: Ch. 7; 2005, 2008, 2020: Ch. 8).<sup>15</sup>

While there are important points of contact between Frank's and Hirsch's concepts, the concepts differ significantly. The core of Frank's concept is comparative evaluation, whereas the core of Hirsch's concept is supply being fixed or near-fixed.<sup>16</sup> The point of contact is that the highest places in any ranking are, as Frank observes, 'fixed inescapably by the laws of simple arithmetic' (Frank 1985b: 102, cf. 1985a: 7). Thus, the most attractive Frank-type positional goods – those that compare most favourably – are also Hirsch-type positional goods.

Apart from this, the concepts differ significantly extensionally. Hirsch's concept will cover all goods that are fixed or near-fixed in supply, which includes many goods valued for their intrinsic properties, rather than how they compare with other goods. Consider, for example, Hirsch's example of 'the foreshore that provides access to the sea' (SLG: 186). This is clearly a Hirsch-positional good, as it is scarce and fixed in supply, and its value comes from the intrinsic attractions of access to the sea, not from some comparison. On the other hand, Frank's concept covers classes of goods such as housing, where goods in the class overall are not (near) fixed in supply, even if the part of the class that compares favourably in one way or another is (e.g. high-end housing, housing in good school districts).

It is also worth distinguishing between Hirsch's and Frank's concepts of positional goods, and Veblen's (1994 [1899]) concept of 'conspicuous consumption', and the associated concept of 'Veblen goods', with which positional goods are often associated.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>It should be noted that such comparatively evaluated goods are often consumed not as a matter of competition for status, but in order to stay on a par with one's peers or as a response to what is considered normal in one's environment (Lichtenberg 1996; Frank 1997, 2020: Ch. 8; Frank *et al.* 2014).

<sup>16</sup>We also see that the way Frank renders Hirsch's concept in the passage cited is not correct: 'things that derive their value primarily from their scarcity rather than their absolute characteristics' only covers what Hirsch described as 'direct social scarcity', but not incidental social scarcity or physical scarcity. One place where Hirsch is very clear about this is on p. 65, where he contrasts the chase for 'baubles and trinkets' that Adam Smith described with the modern problem, the chase for 'scarcities desired in their own right' (i.e. things that are valued for their intrinsic properties rather than their scarcity).

<sup>17</sup>E.g. Solnick and Hemenway (2005: 147). Moreover, Schneider presents a definition of 'positional goods' intended as a reconstruction of Hirsch's original concept on which these are defined as scarce status goods (Schneider 2007: 62, cf. 78).

Central to Veblen's 'Theory of the Leisure Class' is the making of 'invidious comparisons' that become the basis of differences in honour and esteem (Veblen 1994 [1899]: 25–34). These are generally made on the basis of differences in wealth, conspicuous leisure activities, and conspicuous consumption of goods suitable for this purpose, i.e. goods that are observable (conspicuous) and therefore suitable as bases for comparisons (Veblen 1994 [1899]: Chs. 2–4). Thus, Frank shares with Veblen a focus on how a part of the value of a good may be conferred by comparisons. However, while status goods or Veblen goods are a large and important subclass of Frank-type positional goods, as Frank observes (Frank 1985a: 135), Frank's class of positional goods is wider, because the class of goods for which comparisons matter heavily for their evaluation is wider than just status goods. First, it also covers goods that confer other kinds of competitive advantage, e.g. good schools. Second, for many consumer goods, such as consumer electronics, how we assess and value such goods may be relatively heavily affected by comparing different models of the good (see also Heath 2002: 233).<sup>18</sup> For example, a pair of headphones may sound worse and we may enjoy listening to music with them less once we have tried a newer and better pair. Hirsch's positional goods concept differs from both of these concepts as it is not about comparisons at all, and many Hirsch-type positional goods are scarce goods valued for their intrinsic properties. At the same time, high status, the good that conspicuous consumption of Veblen goods should confer, is a central example of a Hirsch-type positional good, as this is socially scarce, and it is also a Frank-type positional good.<sup>19</sup>

Frank and Hirsch use their different concepts of 'positional goods', and analyses of competition for these, to explain many of the same phenomena, such as wasteful positional competition, overconsumption of certain goods, overwork, underinvestment in other goods, the rat race, social waste/avoidable welfare loss, and Easterlin's paradox (e.g. Frank 1985b, 1997, 2005, 2020; Frank *et al.* 2014; SLG: 2–10, 28–31, 51–54, 72–77, 111–114). Frank's concept and analyses allow us to understand how these outcomes are caused by dynamics that involve comparisons. This includes competition for high-end Frank-type positional goods but also changing frames of references for what counts as good enough (e.g. Frank 1997; Frank *et al.* 2014). Even if one is mainly interested in Hirsch-type positional goods, Frank's scholarship contributes valuable insights about how mechanisms related to comparisons drive competition for those Hirsch-type positional goods that are high-end Frank-type positional goods.

On the other hand, one of Hirsch's central insights, which is tracked by his concept of positional goods, is that we can expect wasteful positional competition and many of the other undesirable outcomes Frank is concerned with even if people do not care about status or other reasons for evaluating goods comparatively at all. The fact that some intrinsically desirable goods are fixed or near-fixed in supply is sufficient to cause these outcomes. Thus, Hirsch's and Frank's concepts of positional goods point to different mechanisms that cause positional competition and related

<sup>18</sup>Also in the absence of status that may be associated with competitive goods such as good schools, or with possessing newer models of consumer goods, e.g. this may also be the case for home appliances that no one else need ever see.

<sup>19</sup>On the differences between Veblen, Frank and Hirsch, see also Heath (2002: 232–35) and Heath and Potter (2005: 119–22). For an analysis of status as a (Hirsch-type) positional good, see Heath (2022).

outcomes. The class of goods that contributes to these outcomes is, therefore, likely to be larger than Frank's concept of positional goods suggests. The upshot is that there may be explanatory potential in Hirsch's concept that analyses based on Frank's positional goods concept have not tapped into.

Therefore, Hirsch's original positional goods concept should be of interest to economists and social scientists who have mainly relied on Frank's concept. It may be used to formulate novel hypotheses worth examining empirically about competitive dynamics related to goods that are fixed or near-fixed in supply also when these are not mainly evaluated comparatively. Hirsch's concept may usefully supplement Frank's concept.

A risk here is that there is obvious potential for conceptual confusion when the term 'positional goods' is being used in two different senses. Moreover, given the valuable insights that have been made about Frank-type positional goods by Frank and others, I believe Frank's concept should not be abandoned at this point, in order to keep building on these. To reduce the risk of conceptual confusion I therefore recommend that future research should use the term 'positional goods' alongside more self-explanatory terms for the kind of goods studied at any one time. Frank-type positional goods can be referred to as 'comparative goods' or 'comparatively evaluated goods/good types', whereas Hirsch-type positional goods can be referred to as '(near) fixed supply goods', or 'fixed supply goods' as a (less precise) shorthand, or '(extremely) supply-inelastic goods'.

### 3.2 Brighouse and Swift's concept of positional goods

Contemporary philosophers have also taken an interest in positional goods. The dominant definition of 'positional goods' in this literature is a definition given in a very influential paper by Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift (2006) that should probably be credited with introducing the concept 'positional goods' into contemporary philosophy and thus spurring the by now vibrant philosophical literature on the topic.<sup>20</sup> Brighouse and Swift define positional goods as follows:

Positional goods, as we define them, are goods the absolute value of which, to their possessors, depends on those possessors' place in the distribution of the good – on their relative standing with respect to the good in question. (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 474)<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup>There had been only a few treatments of positional goods by philosophers prior to this paper (see Brighouse and Swift 2006: 474–75, n. 4, and references there).

<sup>21</sup>They introduce the concept without any explicit references (see also Brighouse and Swift 2006: 472), and as we will see in what follows, their concept is effectively entirely novel, relative both to that of Frank, which would have been the dominant concept at the time of writing, and to the original concept of Hirsch. Brighouse and Swift do, however, refer to Hirsch further down on p. 474 and cite SLG in note 4 there. There they suggest that their analysis mostly focuses on a subset of socially scarce goods the description of which corresponds to Hirsch's 'incidental social scarcity' as explicated above, but that it is also 'relevant to the other kinds of positional good [sic] Hirsch is concerned with'. As the discussion will show, their concept both differs from Hirsch's general concept and from the subset of Hirsch-type positional goods that are incidentally socially scarce.

This definition is so influential in contemporary philosophical work on positional goods that Drissen (2023) calls it the ‘philosophical understanding’ of positional goods.<sup>22</sup>

The core of Brighouse and Swift’s definition is thus that the ‘absolute value’ of the good in question depends on the possessors’ place in its distribution. Brighouse and Swift’s main examples are education, legal representation and political input (means of influence in a democratic contest) (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 474–75, 478, 486). Arguably, the most salient feature these examples have in common is that they function as *instrumental goods* in specific competitive contexts, in these cases competition for jobs in the labour market, adversarial litigation, and the contest for democratic political power, respectively. The ‘absolute value’ that depends on one’s place in the distribution of these goods is thus their *instrumental value* as competitive means.

Instrumental value in competitive contexts is also the dominant theme in much of Brighouse and Swift’s discussion. They note that what they call ‘positional goods’ ‘have a competitive aspect’ and that they ‘are valued, in part, instrumentally, as means to other goods’ (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 475). Indeed, the typical or ‘conventional case’ of positional goods for Brighouse and Swift is what they also refer to as ‘manifestly competitive goods’ (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 481). However, they explicitly use their concept to also identify what they call ‘latent positional goods’, or ‘goods that have competitive value but are not generally regarded as doing so’ (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 478). Their example is health, which is presumably mainly valued for its own sake, as Brighouse and Swift (2006: 478) acknowledge, but also has instrumental value in the ‘competition for jobs and other scarce goods’ (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 479). This further supports that one of the main uses Brighouse and Swift see for their concept, or an important part of the ‘point’ of the concept, if you will (cp. Haslanger 2012: 223–24, 386), is discussing goods with instrumental, competitive value, whether this instrumental value is more or less evident.

That said, as Brighouse and Swift’s definition is worded, it will also cover some goods beyond instrumental competitive means, as Brighouse and Swift recognize. The only such example they mention is ‘material well-being insofar as it affects happiness, health, self-respect, or social inclusion’ (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 481). Other examples of this kind may include some of Hirsch’s directly socially scarce goods, such as prizes and high social status (Brighouse and Swift’s concept is applied to social status by Cass 2023).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup>This or closely related definitions are used in much subsequent philosophical literature on positional goods (e.g. Freiman 2014: 343; Ben-Shahar 2018: 103; Halliday and Hankins 2020: 281; Cass 2023: 501), and it has also found its way into philosophical scholarship on education (e.g. Ben-Shahar 2016: 85; Halliday 2016: 152), global justice (Ypi 2012: 109), competition (Agmon 2022: 21), the ethics of capitalism (Halliday and Thrasher 2020: Ch. 9), and the ethics of extreme wealth (Axelsen and Nielsen 2024: 814), to mention some examples. However, some of these sources reword the definition somewhat, some also being explicit about this, and while most refer to Brighouse and Swift (2006) as their source, some attribute this or similar definitions to Hirsch.

<sup>23</sup>High social status is of course also instrumentally valuable, but is plausibly also desired for its own sake, see Heffetz and Frank (2011).



I will now demonstrate how Brighthouse and Swift's concept of 'positional goods' differs from the concepts of Frank and Hirsch, starting with Frank. Remember that Frank defines positional goods as goods 'whose value depends relatively heavily on how it compares with other goods in the same category'. Intensionally, this is very different from the definition of Brighthouse and Swift, which is about place in distribution, not comparative evaluation. Extensionally, the concepts may overlap to some degree, as several Frank-type positional goods, such as education, are also Brighthouse/Swift-type positional goods, and goods that compare favourably (or unfavourably) may typically place their possessor favourably (or unfavourably) in some distributive hierarchy for the same reason. However, also extensionally, the concepts differ in significant ways.

First, 'value depending on comparisons' is extensionally different from 'value depending on position' because, as observed in the discussion of Veblen goods, there are cases where how much we appreciate a good depends on comparisons in ways that are independent of any concern with position. When using a device such as a pair of headphones becomes less enjoyable after having tried a newer pair, the effect is generated by the experience of the comparison itself, rather than the position our set occupies (say it is now fourth) in the distribution of headphone sets ordered by sound quality.

A second and important difference between these concepts is that Frank's concept covers goods whose value depends *relatively heavily* on comparisons, whereas Brighthouse and Swift's concept does not include a similar qualifier. This is precisely what allows Brighthouse and Swift's concept to pick out 'latent positional goods', such as health, which has instrumental value in some contexts, even if it is presumably mainly valued for its own sake. This extensional difference is important because it means that empirical findings about Frank-type positional goods from economics and social sciences do not generalize to all Brighthouse/Swift-type positional goods. For example, findings about spending patterns on Frank-type positional goods do not generalize to health specifically, which has been shown to have a spending pattern typical of Frank-type nonpositional goods (Heffetz 2011) but is a Brighthouse/Swift-type 'latent positional good'. Awareness of these differences is important to avoid erroneously applying empirical findings about Frank-type positional goods from the social sciences to discussions of Brighthouse/Swift-type positional goods where this is not warranted.

Next, I will compare Brighthouse and Swift's concept of positional goods to that of Hirsch reconstructed above. The intensional difference is evident: Hirsch's concept is about supply being fixed or near-fixed, not about value depending on one's place in the distribution of the good (see also Heath 2022: n. 72; 2024: n. 26). The main point of contact is that Brighthouse and Swift's concept often picks out goods such as education and political input that function as the *instrumental goods* to compete for access to Hirsch-type positional goods such as attractive jobs or power.

Thus, access to Hirsch-type positional goods often depends on one's position in the distribution of certain Brighthouse/Swift-type positional goods.<sup>24</sup> That this

<sup>24</sup>More precisely, there is a relation of this kind between Hirsch-type positional goods allocated through competitive mechanisms such as markets and the large and important subset of Brighthouse/Swift-type positional goods that are instrumental goods in these mechanisms. However, note that some Brighthouse/



relation holds between Hirsch-type positional goods and instrumental Brighouse/Swift-type positional goods is significant because it shows that, at least in these cases, Hirsch's concept picks out the primary and more explanatorily basic phenomenon, namely that many important and scarce goods are fixed or near-fixed in supply. Brighouse and Swift's concept, on the other hand, should in these cases be seen as derivative, as it picks out a phenomenon explained by Hirsch's concept, namely the importance of place in the distribution of goods that are instrumental to access Hirsch-type positional goods.

I will now argue that Hirsch's concept is also generally more useful than Brighouse and Swift's concept because it often allows us to give better and more intuitive descriptions and analyses of phenomena of social and/or normative relevance (perhaps because it is more basic).<sup>25</sup> To demonstrate this I will examine the arguably main normative claim Brighouse and Swift use their concept to advance, namely that egalitarian, prioritarian and sometimes also sufficientarian considerations all converge in recommending levelling down positional goods (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 472, 474–75, 477). That is, concerns with equality, with helping the worst off, and sometimes also with ensuring that everyone has enough, all require levelling down possession of Brighouse/Swift-type positional goods. Brighouse and Swift seem to think that this claim follows more or less directly from their definition of positional goods, suggesting that:

The very fact that one is worse off than others with respect to a positional good means that one is worse off, in some respect, than one would be if that good were distributed equally. . . . leveling down with respect to positional goods benefits absolutely, in some respect, those who would otherwise have less than others. (Brighouse and Swift 2006: 472, see also 474, 475)

The idea here seems to be that because the value of (Brighouse/Swift-type) positional goods depends on one's place in their distribution, simply by reducing the holdings of someone who is well off in a good of this type, one is thereby at the same time making those with smaller holdings better off.<sup>26</sup>

This levelling down claim, or 'convergence thesis', as it is sometimes referred to, has been very influential in the subsequent philosophical literature on positional

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Swift-type positional goods that are instrumental goods, such as legal representation, are instrumental to competing for a desired outcome that is not as readily described as a scarce good, even if it is also a kind of desirable outcome not available to all interested parties (Hirsch talks of 'judicial decisions' as a separate thing from positional goods, see SLG: 186).

<sup>25</sup>With conceptual engineering terminology, we can say that Hirsch's concept is therefore cognitively more useful, whereas Brighouse and Swift's concept is, in comparison, deficient in virtue of its cognitive effects (see Cappelen 2018: 34) (i.e. how convenient it is to think with the concept). Note that I am not suggesting that more explanatorily basic concepts are always more cognitively useful, as in some cases this is clearly false, only that this happens to be the case for the concepts discussed here.

<sup>26</sup>It should be noted that while Brighouse and Swift (see esp. 2006: 474) make these claims with reference to the familiar 'levelling down objection', their claim strictly speaking cannot be about 'levelling down' in the sense this has in this objection, which is about making someone worse off without thereby making someone better off (cp. Temkin 1993: Ch. 9; 2003: 67). Brighouse and Swift are talking about levelling down in a strictly quantitative sense, as reducing the quantity someone possesses of a good without at the same time increasing the quantity possessed by someone else. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

goods, such that Cass seems to treat it as the standard view (see Cass 2023: 501–2 and references there; see also e.g. Agmon 2022: 21), despite its having been subject to criticisms and refutations (Freiman 2014; Ben-Shahar 2018: 114–15; Heath 2022: 128–30). In the following, I will argue that the critics are right. My main aim while doing so will, however, be to demonstrate that using Hirsch's concept makes this easy to see and that it therefore provides a better and more intuitive analysis of the issue. Given how central this claim is for Brighthouse and Swift and in the subsequent philosophical literature on positional goods, the fact that Hirsch's concept provides a better analysis of this claim provides a strong reason to think this concept may be the more useful concept also more generally.

Consider competition for scarce attractive jobs with the instrumental good, or Brighthouse/Swift-type positional good, of education. The levelling down claim implies that levelling down education 'benefits absolutely, in some respect, those who would otherwise have less than others'. With Hirsch's concept, we would describe the situation as follows: there is a scarce good that is fixed or near-fixed in supply, attractive jobs, accessed by position in the distribution of the instrumental good of education, such that only those above a certain position in the distribution of education get one of the scarce attractive jobs. Let us assume, for ease of exposition, a population of ten in a society with three attractive jobs. The three candidates with the most education get the attractive jobs, whereas individuals ranked 4–10 in education get unattractive jobs.

When the situation is thus described, we can easily see that the levelling down claim must be false. Levelling down an instrumental good does not give more people access to the scarce end-good, nor does it necessarily change who has access to the end-good. Hirsch already observed this, but in the other direction, as he pointed out that expanding or 'levelling up' education will not make more people well off, nor necessarily change who the well-off are, as long as superior jobs remain scarce (SLG: 50).

To spell out where the levelling down claim goes wrong in more detail, consider first levelling down by reducing the size of inequalities in education, without affecting rank. As we can see, this does nothing to benefit the worst off; in fact, it changes nothing at all. While the difference between candidates 3 and 4 (and all other candidates, for that matter) is now smaller, it is still the case that the scarcity of attractive jobs means that the 3 candidates with the most education get these jobs, and the other 7 get unattractive jobs (see also Heath 2022: 128–30).

Next, consider what happens if we level down all the way to equality by levelling all candidates down to the educational level of the lowest-ranked individual, number 10. There are still only three attractive jobs, but there is no longer a ranking in the instrumental good of education that can be used as an allocation mechanism, and the allocative mechanism based on education thus breaks down. This itself does not make anyone better off in terms of the desirable end good (i.e. attractive jobs), nor does it increase the 'absolute value' of anyone's education. On the contrary, this makes education worthless as an instrumental good. Thus, it destroys, rather than increases its instrumental value (Freiman 2014: 357–59; Ben-Shahar 2018: 115; Halliday and Thrasher 2020: 183).

This will not necessarily benefit the previously worst off. Given that the desired end-good remains equally scarce, as its supply is fixed or near-fixed, some

mechanism will still be needed to allocate the good to some, but not all, who are interested. The allocative mechanism that breaks down will have to be replaced by another (SLG: 31; Freiman 2014: 357–59; Ben-Shahar 2018: 115–16; Halliday and Thrasher 2020: 183). There is no way to know in advance whether this new mechanism will change the allocation of the desired end-good to the benefit of the previously worse off, at the expense of the previously best-off, or whether the new allocation will be the same.

Could it still make sense to say that levelling down nevertheless improves the situation of the worse off at least ‘in some respect’? The fact that a new allocation mechanism will have to be found means that there is at least some probability that those who were worst off on the previous allocation mechanism will be among those who do best on the new allocation mechanism. However, I submit that in the case of competition for jobs, the mere possibility that one might do better under a different allocation mechanism is too insubstantial a benefit to count as making one better off ‘in some respect’. I also submit that if we count even this as benefitting the worst off ‘in some respect’, this arguably makes the levelling down claim a claim about an extremely insubstantial benefit, and therefore too weak a claim to be interesting.

Thus, it has been shown again that the levelling down claim is false as a general claim about Brighthouse/Swift-type positional goods, at least if interpreted in a sense that makes it strong enough to be interesting. However, the more important point for our purposes here is that the mistake of asserting the levelling down claim in the first place, or following Brighthouse and Swift in doing so, is much harder to commit if one uses Hirsch’s positional goods concept, rather than that of Brighthouse and Swift. If we describe education as a good ‘the absolute value of which’ depends on the possessor’s place in its distribution, it may seem (and perhaps even seem “plain”, as Brighthouse and Swift 2006: 474 suggest) that taking from the people at the top, or levelling down, by itself improves the value of the holdings of the individuals with smaller shares. If we instead describe education as an instrumental good for accessing attractive jobs – a Hirsch-type positional good that is (near) fixed in supply – it is plain that levelling down education would not, by itself, give more people access to attractive jobs, or otherwise make anyone better off.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, recovering Hirsch’s original concept yields revisionary implications for contemporary philosophical scholarship on positional goods, as it shows that Brighthouse and Swift’s concept is both different from Hirsch’s concept and less useful for understanding and describing the very issues and claims Brighthouse and Swift use their concept to discuss and argue for. Consequently, Brighthouse and Swift’s concept may be best abandoned and replaced with that of Hirsch. Another advantage of focusing on Hirsch’s concept in political philosophy is that, because Hirsch’s concept has been largely ignored until now, focusing on this concept is likely to be

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<sup>27</sup>Another reason the levelling down claim may seem deceptively plausible is that it yields plausible verdicts in some of the cases that Brighthouse and Swift discuss or that readily come to mind, such as levelling down political input/campaign donations. However, this fact is just as readily explained using Hirsch’s concept: we want the democratic competition for positions with power (which are scarce and fixed in supply) to be determined by politically relevant differences between parties (election programmes, candidate quality), but not by inequalities in the instrumental good of financial means. Moreover, we did not need a theory of Brighthouse/Swift-type positional goods to tell us that inequalities in party funding are problematic (for many reasons).

fruitful by raising normative questions that have not yet been examined. However, to avoid confusion between concepts, it may then be advisable to use more self-explanatory terms for Hirsch-type positional goods, just as when supplementing Frank's concept with that of Hirsch, as discussed above. To distinguish Brighouse/Swift-type positional goods from those of Hirsch, one can refer to the former as 'place-value goods', and the most important subclass of these as 'competitive means', or as 'competitive goods' as Brighouse and Swift themselves sometimes do, or simply as 'instrumental goods'.

#### 4. Conclusions and Outlook

'Positional goods', the term Fred Hirsch (1976) first coined in *Social Limits to Growth*, is now an important concept in economics, the social sciences and philosophy. Although Hirsch never gives a precise and succinct definition of the term he coined, I have argued that it is possible to reconstruct Hirsch's concept of positional goods as goods that are scarce and fixed or near-fixed in supply, at least without a decrease in quality, at least in the short or medium term. They are 'positional' in the sense that access to these goods (at least when quality is to be preserved) depends on position in the distribution of some other, instrumental good, often income and wealth.

However, in the contemporary literature on positional goods, many different concepts of 'positional goods' are in use, and as we have seen above, the two most influential definitions, the definition of Frank in economics and the social sciences and the definition of Brighouse and Swift in philosophical scholarship, differ significantly from Hirsch's concept, as well as from each other. On the one hand, the fact that many different concepts have emerged can be seen as a testament to the fruitfulness of Hirsch's original discussion in SLG. On the other hand, a situation where the same concept is being used in different ways is not without downsides. It is a source of potential confusion if, for example, insights that are true of one type of 'positional goods' are applied to a 'positional good' of another type. Differences in concept use along disciplinary boundaries may be particularly unfortunate, as these may complicate interdisciplinary communication. Philosophers, economists and social scientists could have much to contribute to each other's work on positional goods if they could talk about the same things.

I have specifically argued that Hirsch's original concept has much to contribute to contemporary scholarship, both in economics and social sciences and in philosophy. While Frank's concept has been used to gain insights about how comparisons matter for competitive dynamics, one of Hirsch's main points is that when the supply of a good is fixed or near-fixed competitive dynamics can emerge even in the absence of comparisons. Thus, Hirsch's concept is likely to have explanatory potential with regard to competitive dynamics that studies using Frank's concept have not yet begun tapping into. As regards Brighouse and Swift's concept, recovering Hirsch's original concept was particularly useful, as Hirsch's concept is more explanatorily basic and more useful for examining the kind of normative issues and claims Brighouse and Swift and others in this literature are

interested in. Therefore, it may be beneficial to abandon Brighouse and Swift's concept entirely and replace it with Hirsch's concept.

Despite the untapped potential I see in Hirsch's original positional goods concept, and the downsides of conceptual variation, I do not advocate for a complete return to Hirsch's original concept. Scholarship using Frank's concept is now well established and has made important discoveries about Frank-type positional goods that are worth preserving and building on. Instead, I argue that in order to reduce the downsides of different positional goods concepts coexisting, future scholarship should use the term 'positional goods' alongside more self-explanatory terms for the kind of goods studied at any given time. Hirsch-type positional goods can be referred to as, for example, '(near) fixed supply goods' or '(extremely) supply-inelastic goods'; Frank-type positional goods as, for example, 'comparative goods'; and Brighouse/Swift-type positional goods as 'place-value goods', and the most important subclass of these as 'competitive means', or 'instrumental goods'. As this paper shows, there is much more work to be done on goods that are scarce and fixed or near-fixed in supply.

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