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What Is Wrong With Grade Inflation (if Anything)?

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Abstract: *Grade inflation is a global phenomenon that has garnered widespread condemnation among educators, researchers, and the public. Yet, few have deliberated over the ethics of grading, let alone the ethics of grade inflation. The purpose of this paper is to map out and examine the ethics of grade inflation. By way of beginning, we clarify why grade inflation is a problem of practical ethics embedded in contemporary social practice. Then, we illuminate three different aspects of grade inflation—longitudinal, compressed, and comparative—and explore the ethical dilemmas that each one raises. We demonstrate how these three aspects may be seen as corresponding to three different victims of grade inflation—individuals, institutions, and society—and hence also to three potential agents of harm—teachers, schools, and educational systems. Next, we reflect upon various compelling reasons that these agents inflate grades, whether from an ethic of care, fiduciary responsibility, or simple self-preservation. Subsequently, we consider a variety of means of combatting grade inflation, and invite more educators and philosophers to delve into the complex practical ethics of grade inflation.*

> The grades that faculty members now give—not only at Harvard but at many other elite universities—deserve to be a scandal.… In a healthy university, it would not be necessary to say what is wrong with grade inflation. But once the evil becomes routine, people can no longer see it for what it is. (Mansfield, 2001)

> Despite all of my trying and his trying, he was still failing … but I was supposed to pass him anyway. So I would just pass him and I said, "I don't know what this means, I will be so embarrassed later on, if somebody notices that it's my name attached to this pass." … I knew that it was all a sham. ("Rebecca," 12th grade Science teacher, personal communication, April 30, 2013)

> Current System—Failure is not an option. Should Be—You get what you earn. We need to prepare students for the real world, not baby them. We are doing students a grave injustice by not preparing them for life. (Tierney, Simon, & Charland, 2011, p. 218)

> [In Portugal, there is a] nationally widespread rumour that independent private, fee-paying schools benefit their students by giving them better scores than they deserve. If true, this would mean unfairly improving their chances of accessing higher education and, thus, reproducing and consolidating socioeconomic inequalities. (Nata, Pereira, & Neves, 2014, p. 853)

These quotations—by a Harvard University professor, a private high school teacher in the United States, a public school teacher in Ontario, Canada, and researchers in Portugal—all speak to the ethics of grade inflation. In particular, they condemn grade inflation as a "scandal," something "evil," a "sham," a "grave injustice," and an "unfair" violation of what students "deserve." Why? What is so bad about grade inflation?

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It may be that this is obvious (as Harvey Mansfield believes it would be in a "healthy" context), but the ethical case has nonetheless not been carefully examined. Of the small number of philosophical papers on grading, very few address grade inflation (we can literally count them on the fingers of one hand: Chartier, 2003; Curren, 1995; Deutsch, 1979; Schrag, 2001; Zhang & Burry-Stock, 2003).

This is curious, because we assume that grading or marking (we use the terms interchangeably) is a practice that virtually all philosophers of education—and readers of this article—participate in, and that we all have likely found frustrating on various occasions. Often, the frustration stems simply from how time-consuming and boring marking papers can be. But our guess is that we have also each had the experience of feeling ethically stymied or compromised in marking a paper or a student. In this respect, the ethics of grading is a realm of practical ethics that most or all of us are directly engaged in enacting (for better or worse) and that we hence also have an interest in improving in theory and in practice.

Our purpose in this article, therefore, is to map out the ethics of grade inflation. We begin by explaining why we focus on grade inflation as a problem of practical ethics embedded in contemporary social practice, rather than exploring the ethics of grading from a more idealized and foundational standpoint. We then clarify three different aspects of grade inflation—longitudinal, compressed, and comparative—and discuss the ethical dilemmas that each one raises. We suggest that these three aspects can be seen as corresponding to three different victims of grade inflation—individuals, institutions, and society—and hence also to three potential agents of harm—teachers, schools, and educational systems. At the same time, we acknowledge many compelling reasons that these agents inflate grades, whether from an ethic of care, fiduciary responsibility, or simple self-preservation. We conclude by considering a variety of means of combatting grade inflation, and inviting more philosophers to delve into the complex practical ethics of grade inflation.

Grading as an Embedded Social Practice

Grade inflation is a practice that admittedly makes sense only within a broader understanding of grading itself. We therefore risk getting ahead of ourselves by trying to map the ethics of grade inflation without first mapping the ethics of grading. To do that, in turn, might require that we start with more fundamental questions of educational ethics, such as the aims of education. This might lead us to consider the aims that teachers and schools in particular should pursue, and then to ask whether grades are effective means of achieving any of these aims (and how we would know). If grades are not effective for achieving defensible educational ends, then presumably assigning grades is at least an inappropriate activity, and possibly even unethical. Even if grades are effective means of achieving one or more appropriate educational aims, we would still want to know if they also stymie or undermine other appropriate aims that teachers have. If they do not, then presumably assigning grades is ethically permitted or even required. If assigning grades has a mix of positive and negative consequences, however, then one has to consider alternatives: weighing aims against one another, considering other possible means of achieving the aims that grades support or overcoming the aims that they stymie, *et cetera*.[2] Only then might we be prepared to consider the ethics of grade inflation in particular.

This top-down reasoning makes a lot of sense with respect to ethical clarity. It is also useful if one is in the position of designing an educational system entirely from scratch—and potentially designing employment

[2] By "consequences," we don't mean to imply a consequentialist or utilitarian framework; such consequences could simply be positioning teachers in inappropriate relationships to one another, or failing to respect children's intellectual independence (see Curren, 1995).

and social welfare systems from scratch, too. But we suggest that such an approach doesn't offer much insight into questions of practical ethics such as: What principles and practices for marking should guide current secondary school teachers and faculty members at colleges and universities? Are there more or less ethical ways of computing, assigning, and/or communicating grades; if so, what are they and why? With respect to grade inflation in particular, what obligations, if any, do teachers or educational institutions have to resist or reduce grade inflation?

In particular, we argue that ideal theorizing about the ethics of grading is inadequate—potentially even misleading—for practical theorizing about the ethics of grading and grade inflation for two reasons. First, marks are a given, so even if grades are ethically indefensible as a matter of ideal theory, it is potentially an ineffective and even self-defeating use of teachers' time, energy, and professional status to campaign against grading, say, rather than to take some other action. Schools worldwide, at every level from primary and secondary through vocational, university, and graduate schools, use grades or marks as a fundamental sorting and signaling mechanism. Although both letter grades (starting in the US, and spreading worldwide) and honors degree classifications (starting in the UK, and spreading worldwide) are each barely century-old inventions, they are treated as essential to the logic and functioning of schools and universities.[3] It may be that this is ethically unjustifiable. But there are many ethically unjustifiable features of contemporary, bureaucratized and industrialized life. We need to know more than that a practice would ideally not exist to judge what to do about the practice once it is already in place.

Second and relatedly, education itself is a decidedly non-ideal sociopolitical practice, embedded in broader non-ideal sociopolitical structures and relationships. To know that grading would have particular features (or not exist at all) given the ideal aims of education is to tell us almost nothing about the features of grading given education's current aims and functions. Schools, for example, are key institutions in credentialing and sorting people and groups, in gatekeeping, and in stratifying society along a variety of dimensions. Schools enable young people to gain or lose access to further education, to vocational and career opportunities, to civic engagement and empowerment opportunities, and to multiple forms of social, political, economic, and cultural capital. As an empirical matter, in other words, schools distribute an incredibly powerful positional good—that of education.

It seems very likely that in a just society, education would not offer positional advantages as extensive as it currently does (for compelling arguments in this regard, see Brighouse & Swift, 2006; Walzer, 1983). It is incontrovertible that in a just society, educational institutions would be structured so as to help prevent and overcome the intergenerational transmission of inequality—exactly the opposite of what most secondary and tertiary educational institutions do now in the US, Canada, UK, and most other countries. To know that grading practices would take a particular form in a just society with just educational institutions, therefore, at best tells us nothing, and may well mislead us with respect to what ethical grading practices would look like in our current society, where educational institutions exacerbate intra- and inter-generational injustice. We are responsible for reasoning about what Dennis Thompson (2007) rightly describes as "the moral life that dwells among the structures of society," not the moral demands of a purely imaginary society.

In this respect, we see the practical ethics of grading and of grade inflation as being two examples of a larger set of dilemmas for educators and educational policymakers about how to enact justice in unjust contexts (see Levinson, 2015; Levinson & Theisen-Homer, 2015). As educators (not to mention as citizens more broadly), we frequently find ourselves trying to do the right thing while, and even by, working within institutional and social structures that contribute to larger injustices. What constitutes just action within these

[3] A–F letter grades started at Harvard in 1890s, then spread to US universities and down to schools over the following decades. They have since spread to many school systems worldwide. Honours degree classifications started at Oxford in 1918 and similarly spread to other English universities then across the Commonwealth.

contexts is a question of practical ethics that is neither reducible to, nor even necessarily directly guided by, what Amartya Sen (2009) calls "transcendental" judgments about ideally just states of affairs. It's not that ideal theory is entirely irrelevant. As others have pointed out in critiquing Sen, the immediate but partial mitigation of injustice may foreclose more transformative possibilities that are dependent upon a different path (Stemplowska, 2014). But at the same time, as individuals who are attempting to act ethically in the here-and-now and to avoid complicity with avoidable forms of social and educational injustice, educators cannot be in the business of speculating about and analyzing long-term path dependency. They need more immediate action-guiding principles and practices. In particular, they need guidance about what constitutes ethical action in ethically compromised circumstances—of which decisions about grade inflation constitute one aspect.

Although we acknowledge, therefore, that an ethical analysis of grade inflation would benefit from being situated within a comprehensive analysis of grading as a broader social practice, and that this analysis would benefit from considering the ethics of education as a social practice, we argue that it is both possible and useful to consider the ethics of grade inflation on its own. Furthermore, while it is certainly possible that our more ground-up approach to the ethics of grade inflation could undercut efforts to bring about a just society in which education doesn't carry such steep positional advantages, we hope and expect that neither our analysis nor our conclusions are ultimately in tension with more idealized reform goals.

Grade Inflation as a Global Social Practice

So what is grade inflation? At its most basic, grade inflation is "student attainment of higher grades independent of increased levels of academic attainment" (Eiszler, 2002, p. 489). In other words, students are awarded higher marks without demonstrating that they have higher levels of mastery.

Even with this precise a definition, however, there are a few different ways of understanding grade inflation. One is *longitudinally*, noting that the average mark given at one point in time is significantly higher than the average mark earned by students at an earlier point in time. There is substantial evidence that this is the case worldwide. In the United States, for example, high school grades inflated by as much as 12.5% between 1991-2003 (ACT, 2005). University grades have inflated even faster: A's and A minuses are now the most frequently awarded grades at US colleges and universities, comprising 43% of all grades, up from 31% in 1988 and 15% in 1960 (Rampell, 2011). In UK universities, the number of firsts and 2:1s has increased drastically in just the past ten years (Coughlan, 2014). Similar increases in overall averages and skews toward top marks have been documented in Canada, France, Israel, and Sweden, among many other countries (Alphonso, 2014; Bamat, 2014; Maagan & Shapira, 2013; Wikström & Wikström, 2005). Notably, these grade increases have not been matched by increasing scores on standardized assessments that are thought to track students' knowledge and skills.

Because grade inflation has in many contexts involved not just a shift rightward in the bell curve (so that a normal distribution remains, but centered on a B, say, instead of on a C), but also a narrowing in the range of marks awarded, grade inflation may also be understood as grade *compression*. Here, inflation may (or may not) have a longitudinal component. Rather, what is significant is that it sets what is seen as an inflated floor for achievement. Average or even relatively poor work may earn a B or B+, say, meaning that there is less capacity to signal variation in achievement, since grades go up only to A. Compression may also result in an increased number of top marks being awarded, as teachers or professors try to find some means of signaling above-average achievement, which now can only be done with grades of A- or A.

A third way to understand grade inflation is neither longitudinal nor in comparison to a normal distribution within a single institution, but in *comparative* terms among institutions. In particular, studies in a

wide range of countries have documented that private institutions (both schools and universities) award higher grades for the same level of work than public institutions seem to do (Nata et al., 2014; Wikström & Wikström, 2005). In Sweden, for instance, a boy with an average level of prior achievement who moves from a public to an independent private school "improves his position in the grade distribution by approximately 15%" (Wikström & Wikström, 2005, p. 309). There is even longer-standing evidence of stunning disparities between public and private schools and universities in the United States (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012). Consider Figure 1, for instance.

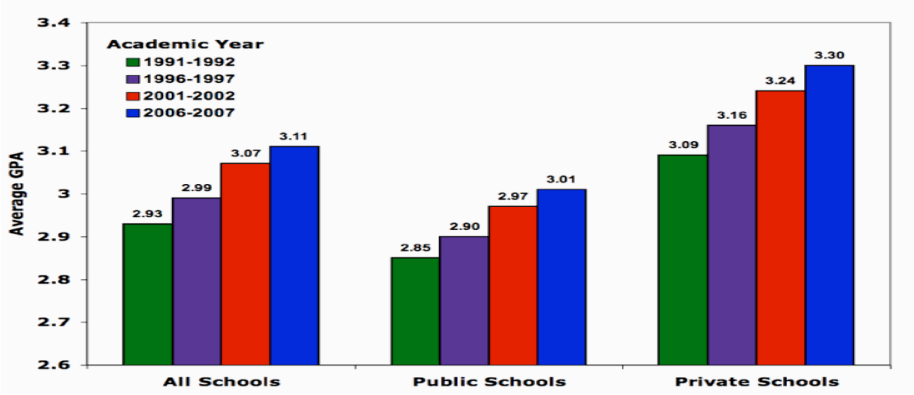

Figure 1: Grade inflation at American colleges and universities (Rojstaczer, 2009)

As these bar graphs show, average grades at private colleges and universities in the United States have for decades been far higher than at public colleges and universities. In 1992, the average public university student had a B- grade point average while the average private college student had a B. By 2007, the public college student had risen to a B average, but private college students in the meantime had risen to a B+.

It is important to acknowledge that comparative grade inflation may not be entirely unjustified. It is reasonable to think that students at more prestigious schools and universities may on average be academically stronger than students at less selective institutions. By this reasoning, higher average grades and grade compression at selective institutions may not indicate "inflation"—although certainly there is a very high risk that such grading practices lead to inflation due to self-reinforcement. "Our students are such high achievers to have even gained entry to our school," teachers or professors may tell themselves, "that they must deserve the high grades we give them. And by their high grades, they demonstrate that they are very high-achieving. And since they are so high-achieving, they deserve the high grades we award." One of us (Levinson) remembers a professor giving exactly such a circular justification when she was an undergraduate at Yale two decades ago; we suspect that similar circularities persist today in many selective institutions, especially since we would expect to find even in highly selective institutions some normal distribution and differentiation among students.

A second justification may be that the expectations are higher at more selective institutions, and hence even relatively poor performance at such a school or university may appropriately earn a higher grade—because it may be of higher quality, or demonstrate greater content mastery and skill—than average performance at a less selective school. We are not claiming that there is good empirical evidence that this is true, just that it could reasonably justify grade compression at highly selective institutions as compared to greater grade spreading at other institutions. Alternatively, such compression may simply be a corollary of the first circularity. "Because our students are so high-achieving, we are very demanding. When they fail to meet our demands, our students are not demonstrating their overall lack of achievement; after all, they are by

definition high-achieving. Students thus deserve at least a B or B+ even for comparatively poor work because we are comparing them to such a stratospheric set of expectations."

This response also serves to highlight the imperviousness of both of these justifications to actual data. If uniformly high achievement is explained (by the first justification) by students' innate talents rather than by inadequate or inflated assessments, and if normally distributed achievement but abnormally high grades are also explained (by the second justification) by students' innate talents, then there is no achievement pattern that could induce faculty at these institutions to admit they were provably engaged in grade inflation. The first two justifications for grade inflation at prestigious and/or selective schools hence risk circularity of the worst kind, as they are impervious to evidence. At the same time, they also potentially have some non-circular empirical and normative justification. After all, it truly could be that students at highly selective schools, colleges, and universities are generally quite talented and motivated, and hence generally do master relevant knowledge and skills so as to merit the high grades they are awarded.

A third reason, however, that grade inflation may be higher at highly prestigious private schools in particular—namely, entitlement—has no such normative justification. It is simply a matter of economic power: as one teacher we interviewed bluntly put it, parents feel that "they are paying and they deserve for their kids to get A's." As a result, this teacher explained, there is substantial "pressure on teachers to inflate grades, to give do-overs and all that kind of thing." Furthermore, there is some evidence that even within-school differences in grade inflation may disproportionately serve more privileged students. One study of very highly-rated public schools that served predominantly middle and upper-middle class students, for example, found that these schools fostered a "winner take all" approach; in order to ensure that their most highly-ranked students were admitted to the most selective colleges and universities, they graded other high-achieving, but not stratospherically-achieving, students more harshly, in order to increase the differential between the top group and all others (Attewell, 2001). This may not be due to financial entitlement, but it still rewards privileged students disproportionately.

Who Is Harmed by Grade Inflation, and How?

These three different forms of grade inflation can be used to draw our attention to three different potential victims of grade inflation. Longitudinal grade inflation could be seen as harming students as individuals, as they are misled about their actual degree of academic mastery. If the marks are interpreted as having the same meaning over time—so that a 2:1 at university, for example, is understood in the UK to represent a high degree of achievement equipping one to enter and succeed at most professions—even though their actual measure of mastery has eroded, then students will misunderstand their own achieved capabilities. They may believe themselves to be well prepared to succeed at endeavors for which they have insufficient knowledge and skills.[4] Students might also be individually harmed by longitudinal grade inflation insofar as they are (unknowingly) dissuaded from working harder, and demanding more of themselves, because they believe themselves to be high-achieving already.

Grade compression, on the other hand, could be understood as harming institutions such as schools and universities, as well as employers. Schools want to signal to students, to higher education admissions officers, and to employers what students know and are able to do, and how each student compares to others. They know that a large part of the value they provide in awarding grades is to signal to external audiences

[4] On the other hand, given the indirect link between traditional academic skills and job market success, the harm to individuals may also be minor. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

students' absolute and relative level of achievement. If they are essentially compelled to choose among a very compressed set of grading options (say, B+ to A range, or even more dichotomously simply a High Second versus a First Class degree), then educational institutions cannot effectively signal either absolute or comparative attainment. There simply are insufficient gradations. Similarly, employers cannot use compressed grades to make meaningful distinctions among job applicants when making hiring distinctions; nor, potentially, can they rely on compressed grades to signal whether any individual student has actually mastered the knowledge and skills they need for the job.

Comparative grade inflation, finally, can be seen as harming society, as it entrenches or even exacerbates social injustice. Those who can pay to attend private educational institutions already are receiving inordinate social and educational benefits, at least where private schools are seen as being stronger than state schools. When private schools and universities award comparatively higher grades to their students than their public counterparts do, then they further magnify social injustice by giving their students an additional unearned advantage in college and graduate admissions. By receiving inflated grades, as well, these students are further entrenching their elite status in an entirely unjustifiable way. They are not personally to blame for these social disparities in marking practices. But the unearned differences reinforce extant injustices in the social distribution of life opportunities to young people.

We are certainly not claiming that the harm inflicted by each of these three types of grade inflation is confined to the particular identified "victim" we just discussed. Grade compression may evidently harm society and individuals as well as institutions. Comparative grade inflation absolutely harms particular institutions and students in addition to society. We hence use the three ways of understanding grade inflation as a heuristic for revealing the three potential victims of the practice, not as an empirical claim, nor certainly a claim of one-to-one correspondence.

In identifying three potential victims of grade inflation, however, we are also enabled to identify three potential perpetrators—or more precisely, to identify three potential agents for whom grade inflation poses ethical dilemmas. The question is whether the ethics of grade inflation are the same for individual teachers, educational institutions such as schools, and educational systems as a whole. One could imagine that the ethical challenges of grade inflation are different for teachers, who have personal relationships with students; for schools, which are positioned as middle-ground institutional actors between students and families whom they serve and the broader social landscape including higher education and employers; and for whole educational systems at the provincial, state, or national level. To talk of "the ethics of grade inflation," therefore, may be misleading, as perhaps there are multiple ethics corresponding to the different levels of teacher, school, and system.

In order to investigate these potentially contrasting ethical dilemmas, we draw on data from each of these levels. In order to capture the ethics of grade inflation for individual teachers and students, we conducted a normative case study inquiry into teachers' struggles with grade inflation at an independent Jewish day school in the Northeastern United States.[5] The school highlights its rigorous academic standards and takes pride in its students' high college attendance rates, with the vast majority of students attending highly selective four-year colleges and universities. The investigation for this study was part of a wider Justice in Schools project, which explores ethical dilemmas in educational policy and practice at the classroom, school, district, and state level.[6] To identify ethical dilemmas in this context of a private Jewish day school, Finefter-Rosenbluh conducted seventeen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with teachers of different subjects, such as Math, History, English and Jewish Studies, between April 2013 and May 2014. We consider

[5] For more about the normative case study approach, see Levinson (2015) and Thatcher, (2006).
[6] For more on this project, see www.justiceinschools.org and Levinson and Fay (in press).

these interviews with the teachers critical, as a number of them raised ethical dilemmas with grading practices—a central part of teachers' work.

To understand ethical dilemmas around grade inflation at the institutional or school-based level, we researched Princeton University's unusual (and ultimately doomed) decade-long experiment in grade deflation. In 2004, Princeton faculty adopted a policy meant to "provide common grading standards across academic departments and to give students clear signals from their teachers about the difference between good work and their very best work" (Ad Hoc Committee, 2014, p. 2). The heart of the policy was a recommendation that no more than 35% of the grades awarded across all courses in a department be A's and A minuses. This was intended to permit significant variation among courses within a single department, but students generally interpreted the policy as a hard quota in each class. We discuss the fate of Princeton's policy below.

Finally, to gain insight into the ethics of grade inflation at the system-wide level, we read numerous research reports and articles about national-level grading practices in the United States, Canada, Israel, and the United Kingdom. We also read a far more selective set of articles about grade inflation in other countries. Because this is a philosophical paper that is concerned with a normative analysis of grade inflation rather than primarily an empirical analysis, we did not attempt to be fully comprehensive in our review of the secondary empirical literature. Rather, we read empirical studies in order to identify normative challenges or dilemmas at work in different national systems—whether or not the authors of the research studies recognized them as such. In order to feel confident we understood the ethical challenges posed by grading practices or patterns, we selected countries that we knew well. We both have taught and parented school-age children in the United States; Levinson has also lived and sent children to school in the UK, while Finefter-Rosenbluh has done the same in Israel. Neither of us has personal experience teaching in Canada, but we researched Canadian grading practices in light of this article's publication venue.

In what follows, we do not offer a systematic empirical analysis of grade inflation at the individual, school, or systemic level. Rather, we draw upon the data we have collected to illuminate dilemmas and tensions that arise in the ethics of grade inflation.

Why Does Grade Inflation Persist?

We have seen how grade inflation may contribute to a number of wrongs. It violates meritocracy, both by giving students more than "they deserve," as Mansfield put it above, and by preventing higher educational institutions or employers from sorting applicants. It tends to favor the already-privileged, and thus to exacerbate existing inequities and injustices. It potentially diminishes student effort and achievement, whether by misleading students into thinking that they are achieving at higher levels than they truly are, or by allowing students to slip into shoddy study and work habits because they know (thanks especially to grade compression) that they are likely to get decent marks regardless. In this respect, grade inflation sacrifices academic standards, and can diminish teachers' integrity (Santoro, 2013). As one teacher we interviewed put it, "There is a moral thing that I need to figure out with myself. How do [teachers] live with themselves? We just take part in this thing.… I am a partner in crime.… I am a full contributor [to] grade inflation!" Another teacher volunteered with regard to grade inflation, "I try not to be disillusioned with my colleagues because I want to have a trusting relationship with them. However, it is the case that when I feel like people are making—morally questionable sounds too big, but—just questionable decisions."

Given all of these wrongs, why does grade inflation persist? Are teachers and schools simply unethical? Or are there positive normative reasons for educators, institutions, and even systems to inflate grades?

Before we address different agents' specific reasons for inflating grades, it is important to note that there are two general reasons that grade inflation seems normatively compelling. First, empirical evidence strongly suggests that students are systematically advantaged in the education and labor markets by higher grades, even when admissions officers and employers have access to standardized metrics (such as test scores) that suggest that higher grades are signs of grade inflation rather than of higher performance, and even when the schools or universities that engage in inflation are judged equal in prestige and status to the non-inflating universities (Ad Hoc Committee, 2014; Swift, Moore, Sharek, & Gino, 2013). "[C]andidates who happen to graduate from schools with higher grading norms may actually have a better chance of being accepted to college or graduate school. This is true independent of their personal performance in that situation.… This should be cause for concern among stakeholders at institutions with tougher grading norms. The high standards to which the students at these institutions are held may be mistaken for poor performance" (Swift et al., 2013, p. e69258).

Second, there is equally strong empirical evidence that competitive grading and ranking have numerous negative effects, as Princeton discovered during its experiment with grade deflation. The negative effects at Princeton were numerous, and the positive effects non-existent (Ad Hoc Committee, 2014, pp. 12, 13, 16). Undergrads described the atmosphere on Princeton's campus as competitive rather than collegial. "Classes here often feel like shark tanks," one student wrote; even faculty likened the campus culture to "a pressure cooker." There was evidence that high school students who were admitted to Princeton disproportionately matriculated to other Ivies because of concerns over competition for scarce A and A- grades. Students at Princeton also worried that they were losing out in graduate school admissions and hiring. Students and faculty alike agreed that the new grading policies had not clarified or systematized grading standards. Grade compression did not change appreciably after the deflationary policy was adopted. Hence professors could not give clearer "signals" about the quality of student work. Furthermore, anxiety over grades seemed to reduce students' attentiveness to other forms of feedback from professors. In 2014, therefore, Princeton faculty abandoned their deflationary policies.[7]

Similarly, evidence from the business world suggests that stringent grading and especially ranking approaches are highly counterproductive. General Electric and Microsoft, among other companies, have in recent years famously abandoned their long-standing tradition of "stack ranking" employees, whereby they graded every employee in a division in relation to all others and fired the bottom ten or so percent each year (Kanell, 2012; Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015; Ovide & Feintzeig, 2013). Critics stressed that it stifled innovation, as employees in these companies were more concerned about making sure that their peers failed instead of proposing new inventions or solutions to problems. Stack ranking was also found to lower productivity, bring inequity and skepticism, negatively affect employee engagement, reduce collaboration, increase cheating, damage leaders' moral status, and increase mistrust in leadership (Murray, 2010).

For both of these reasons, then, grade inflation may have some general normative appeal, as it offers individual students greater opportunities and avoids the negative impacts on individual and institutional well-being that may accompany deflationary or other more competitive assessment policies. With this in mind, we now turn to considering teachers', then schools', then systems' ethical reasons for inflating grades.

Teachers: An Ethic of Care

Teachers generally operate from an ethic of care toward their students—care that, for reasons of concern about their students' psychology, motivation, or life prospects, leads them to inflate grades. Numerous

[7] We have borrowed the language in this paragraph from Levinson and Finefter-Rosenbluh (in press).

teachers we interviewed talked about their students' almost pathological stress about grades; some admitted to trying to lessen that stress by engaging in grade inflation. One teacher, for example, tried to reduce parental and social "pressure from the outside"—pressure that she said led even to some students being "hospitalized"—by taking an "easy-going" approach to grading. But because "we live in a very achieving society," she admitted, "students interpret" her approach "as weakness."

The same teacher described her conception of high school as a time to have fun, not just to stress about college admissions. "You are allowed to enjoy your school years. It's OK to get a … C." But her conception of grades' meaning contrasts starkly with her students' interpretation. "One of my students has recently earned 92% on an exam and wants to retake it. She has to get at least an A; she cannot get an A-." The teacher may interpret a C as a sign that a student understandably or even appropriately prioritized her personal life over her academic life one week; the student, however, may interpret the same grade as a devastating blow to her aspirations to be admitted to a highly selective university. Under such circumstances, teachers may decide that inflating grades is preferable to causing their students deep psychological harm, or in fact preventing their achievement of their future educational and vocational goals.

If students were simply misguided in prioritizing grades so heavily, then we might propose other means than grade inflation of mitigating their stress. But teachers know that sometimes students are right—and they act accordingly when the stakes are clear. We see this profoundly in the specific instance of teachers' encounter with the "cut score" (in US parlance) or "grade boundary" (in UK). Many rewards and opportunities in the UK, US, and elsewhere are tied to discontinuous metrics. In the UK, for example, sixteen-year-old students need five GCSEs with a C grade or better in order to move on to further education or career training. Four GCSEs will not cut it. Nor will a GCSE that was just one point under the scaled "grade boundaries" that delineate a C. On the November 2014 "Mathematics (H)" GCSE exam, for example, a student whose scaled mark was 31-55 earned a D, while 56-80 earned a C (AQA, 2015). A student with a 55 scaled mark hence would fail to qualify for further education or training—and in fact have no more opportunities than a student with a scaled mark of 32—while a student with a 56 scaled mark would hit the magic C grade and qualify for a multitude of further opportunities. Similar discontinuities hold across the entire UK educational system, where the difference of a point on one paper can mean the difference, say, between a first-class degree and a 2:1. Grades in the US rely on similar discontinuous metrics, whether via cut scores on standardized exams to distinguish "Needs Improvement" from "Proficient," or grade averages for courses that classify a 59 as failing and a 60 as passing.

Because high stakes are discontinuous, many educators will nudge to the positive side of the boundary. As educators with responsibility for marking, we are aware of these discontinuities and the impact that falling on the right or wrong side of the line may have on students' life prospects. Teachers want to expand students' opportunities, not constrain them; many teachers therefore will engage in some "nudging over the boundary" when the stakes are sufficiently high.

Consider, for example, the incredibly high-stakes question of who actually earns a diploma and graduates. One teacher we interviewed agonized over "kids who have so much missing work and they are seniors and basically they are not gonna graduate." As he ultimately explained, though, "there is no satisfactory solution because we are not willing to flunk a kid." That discontinuity—preventing a student from graduating high school and moving onto university, simply because he is missing work for one class in one particular month—is one that many teachers try to avoid, even if it means passing students who have done insufficient work. In this respect, grade inflation may (rightly or wrongly) be perceived by teachers as a "personal" expression of care, or an expression of the school's "cultural" commitment to children's success. "We've created an environment in which we try to find success for kids no matter where!" one teacher

exclaimed. "I think it sometimes does lead us to grade inflate or to be easier on the kid than we would otherwise."

Educators are also aware that students' performances on any particular set of assessments do not tell the whole story even about their potential academic capacities, let alone about their broader life trajectories. We would be curious if any reader of this article with, say, at least five years of experience in marking papers has never made a judgment call and raised a student's mark above what it "objectively" merited. We each certainly have. With respect to students as individuals, and with regard to the absolute value that it brought those students, we felt then and continue to feel that "massaging" their grades in that way was the right thing to do. But insofar as education is a positional good, and that grades are the grounds upon which students are compared, we may well have unjustly harmed other students by elevating their position.

Schools: An Ethic of Markets and Fiduciary Duty

Schools may also implicitly endorse grade inflation based upon an ethic of care for their students. In addition, however, many private schools expand this personal ethic of care into an institutional fiduciary duty. Selective private schools, especially, essentially enter into a contract with parents to prepare their children for success in the higher education and/or professional marketplace.[8] They cannot promise parents that every child will be successful; if nothing else, a lot rides on the child's willingness and capacity to do the work. But the school is arguably delinquent in fulfilling its obligations if it knowingly takes action that diminishes hard-working students' future opportunities—as grade deflation would do. As one teacher explained, "The fact of the matter is that it costs $35,000 a year to go to this school.… I think it has a real impact on the way our kids learn and the way we interact with families.… [I]f we're going to be authentic about who we are and who we serve, I think that should be part of a conversation." Consider the teacher we quoted above, who explained that parents feel "they are paying and they deserve for their kids to get A's." Although she decried this "entitlement" and pressure toward grade inflation as "kind of immoral," by her very equivocation she demonstrates her own ambivalence. After all, why should parents pay tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars to a school that holds their child back in the competitive college and career marketplace? Evidence from Princeton tells a similar story. If students risk being harmed in medical, law, and graduate school admissions, or in employment with competitive firms post-graduation due to Princeton's policy of grade deflation, it would arguably have been a breach of contract for Princeton to continue these policies.

Deflating rather than inflating grades would also be a foolish decision in a competitive educational marketplace. Again, Princeton's experience is instructive, as it saw a measurable dip in students' matriculation rate due to prospective students' concerns about grade deflation's effects on their future prospects. One might think that Princeton would be silly to worry about a few percentage points here or there in matriculation numbers given its status as an extraordinarily selective, Ivy League university. But in an era of institutional rankings by *US News and World Report* and other publications, where matriculation dips can lead to ranking dips which can then lead to applicant dips and an ever-more-vicious cycle, even highly selective universities and high schools are understandably concerned about any apparent reduction in their yield.

Nor are such concerns limited to the United States or to institutions of higher education; evidence worldwide suggests that private schools respond to market pressures by inflating grades, since "if the cost of grade inflation (in terms of being detected cheating) is low enough, some grade inflation is always optimal from the perspective of the school" (Wikström & Wikström, 2005, p. 310). In Portugal, as we noted above, "Some private schools are actually well-known for receiving students from the public system who are trying

[8] Public schools in very high-income districts might be seen in a similar light, as parents pay inflated housing prices in order to gain access to highly-rated district schools.

to get higher scores in order to be able to access their desired study programme in higher education, and can afford the fees" (Nata et al., 2014, p. 854). A study analyzing 11 million student records confirmed that "independent private schools inflate their students' scores when compared to both public and government-dependent private schools. It is also plain that this discrepancy is not uniformly distributed across grades: rather, it is higher where scores matter most in the competition for the scarce places available in public higher education" (Nata et al., 2014, pp. 869-870).

Grade inflation thus serves schools as institutions by helping them position themselves in a competitive marketplace and appeal to affluent parents who hope to purchase access to future opportunities by starting early. Although such practices are rightly condemned for egalitarian reasons of social justice and equal opportunity, individual institutions may not deserve condemnation insofar as they face a collective action problem; no institution on its own can do anything to combat a culture of grade inflation, but it and its students may suffer significant and lasting harm if it takes unilateral deflationary action.[9]

It may also be worth noting that individual teachers—especially university adjuncts and untenured professors who rely on good course evaluations for continued employment—face similar perverse incentives, leading them to inflate grades in order to obtain better evaluations (Eiszler, 2002). As we mentioned above, therefore, it is not only educational institutions that face these particular dilemmas of ethical agency.

Systems: An Ethic of Assets—and Self-Preservation

Finally, educational systems at the district, provincial, state, or national level have at least two reasons to inflate grades: namely, a constructive, asset-oriented approach to students, and an avoidance-oriented approach to public loss of face. Ontario arguably exemplifies the asset-oriented approach to grade inflation. Ontario abandoned provincial standardized exams in 1967 on the grounds that students would be more authentically and fairly assessed by their own teachers. According to one study by the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, after the tests were terminated, high school failure rates dropped from a ten-year average of 20 percent to 6 to 8 percent. Higher marks were also given to more students—"A" students increased from 18 percent in 1992 to 40 percent by 2007—and average marks moved slowly up in the years after (King & Peart, 1994).[10] Even more recently, Ontario adopted an explicit policy of criterion- and asset-oriented grading, where students were not to be punished via grade demotions for late or missing work, for unexcused absences, or other violations of school policy or indications of absence of effort. Rather, grades are intended solely to indicate students' demonstrated mastery of the academic material. As a result, teachers may be more likely to inflate grades for positive indicators than to deflate grades for negative indicators, leading to further increases in grade inflation.

The other incentive for systems to inflate grades is to avoid punishment: loss of face, autonomy over educational policy or practice, or funding. Perhaps the most evident example of this (perverse) incentive in action is the response of individual states to high-stakes No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in the United States. Because schools designated as "failing" or "in need of improvement" generate a cascading series of punishments, states have an incentive to inflate scores across the board and achieve passing ratings. There is overwhelming evidence that as a result, weaker states set much lower passing cut scores on their state exams so their schools achieve "proficiency" rather than fail (Levinson, 2010).

Similar incentives may also influence systems operating on a national or even global level. The consortium of Ontario schools offering the International Baccalaureate (IB), for instance, announced in 2014

[9] For more on collective action problems and grade inflation as an example of the tragedy of the commons, see Chapter 3 in Levinson and Fay (in press).

[10] There is evidence of grade inflation in Ontario at the higher education level, too; see Anglin and Meng (2000).

that it "is boosting the worth of its marks for its graduating high-school students" in Canada, "responding to what it sees as grade inflation in provincial education systems" (Alphonso, 2014). In this respect, the IB is also taking consideration of its fiduciary responsibilities to its clients—more specifically, its students—who otherwise risk being demoted in higher education admissions.

What Should Be Done? Three Highly Imperfect Options

Given these individual, institutional, and systemic reasons to inflate grades, but also the harms and injustices that grade inflation can cause, what, if anything, should be done?

Contextualize and Adjust Grades

One approach to combatting grade inflation and clarifying the meaning of grades in context is to include on each student's transcript not just their own grade in each course, but also the mean or modal grade for that course, the grade distribution, or simply an indication of whether the student's grade is above, at, or below the mean for the class. This additional information seemingly helps those who are using the transcript to make admissions or employment decisions to properly interpret the grade, without any attendant cost.

But contextualizing a grade within a class average may actually have a number of counterproductive results. First, it makes it virtually impossible for a professor to foster cooperation and to make grading an indication of absolute learning, as it forces positional evaluation and striving for positional advantage. "Class rankings make it clear to students in a school that they are engaged in a zero-sum game. They also encourage students' complaints about particular grades and make invidious distinctions between students who are similar in ability" (Attewell, 2001, p. 280). At Princeton, for example, students complained bitterly about the university's academic culture becoming one of competition and mutual suspicion. They pointed out that not only did that increase their stress levels but it also reduced their learning, which seems likely given the considerable evidence of greater learning in cooperative rather than competitive circumstances (Johnson, 1991; Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 1986; Johnson & Roger, 1983).[11]

Second, contextualizing a grade within a class average seems to suggest that a course with a high mean grade is a less "rigorous" course, thus encouraging professors or teachers to grade down (which is often its intent). But arguably, an ideal teacher who is engaged in criterion-based grading will be able by the end of the semester or year to assign (almost) every student an A. After all, a truly great teacher will by definition motivate (almost) all students to engage deeply with the material and offer students supports for mastering it.[12] Hence, a low mean would be embarrassing: it would indicate failure on the teacher's part, not on the students'.

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[11] On the other hand, Deutsch's Bowles-and-Gintis-inspired functional analysis suggests that dividing students via grades may be an *intentional* means of conquering them by reinforcing hierarchy. In an argument reminiscent of those about union busting, he suggests that grades maintain students' subordinate positions by pitting them against each other instead of against the teacher. "By grading students individually, in comparison with one another, teachers deflect conflict from themselves by encouraging conflict among the students. They inhibit collective action against them by stimulating the students to compete with one another and by fostering the illusion that learning occurs primarily in the superior-inferior relation and not in relations among peers" (Deutsch, 1979, pp. 395-396).

[12] We have (almost) in parentheses to acknowledge that some things are out of even a great teacher's control: a student who is simply unprepared or underprepared to do the work; a student suffering illness, or distracted by tragedies at home (or love!), one who has a solely instrumental view about courses, etc.

This argument holds, of course, only if we think that demonstrating full mastery is an appropriate expectation for (almost) every student in a course—if we don't judge that a class in which everyone demonstrates deep mastery of the course material is simply too easy. This is another presupposition built into the critique of grade compression: namely, that there should be an achievement spread, and if there is not, then that means the course is not demanding enough. This certainly underlies much standardized assessment design: psychometricians intentionally include a sufficient number of very hard questions to be able to make gradated distinctions (even) among high achievers.

So this gets to something fundamental about how many of us seem to understand education and/or people—at least, when we decry apparent grade inflation. We seem either to think that schools' purpose is to stratify and make distinctions between people, or that the average person is not capable (even with high quality teaching and reasonable motivation) of mastering challenging subject matter or skills. As Morton Deutsch put it with panache, "[A] high grade is a distributive good of uncertain quality and unspecific meaning, which nevertheless has considerable importance because of its evaluative significance and artificially induced scarcity" (Deutsch, 1979, p. 395). Teachers adhere to these conceptions of high grades, too. As one teacher explained, "[A] lot of students feel a lot of pressure, either internal or external to succeed, and not everyone can succeed in everything. I am trying to give accurate grades and if the student didn't earn it I am not going to give it to them."

Even if high grades were not made artificially scarce, however, and even if they were imbued with a very specific and transparent meaning of content mastery that all students could with sufficient effort achieve, there may still be good reason to use grades—and even concern about the risk of earning a low grade—as motivating devices. Treating grades as mere measures of academic attainment, and disavowing motivation as an appropriate component of grading, ignores the fact that assignments are often means for simultaneously promoting and assessing student learning. This is particularly true in creative acts such as writing, dramatic performances, devising and running scientific experiments, and other "performances of understanding."

When we assign students to write a twenty-page paper for our classes, for example, we do so because we want them to learn something deeply, which they are most likely to do via writing about it. Frankly, their learning is more important to us than our assessing their learning in the form of a grade; little would be lost if they wrote the paper but we never graded it (so long as we or some other authentic and expert audience did provide them feedback—although even that is often secondary to the learning the student achieves through the writing process itself). At the same time, we use their writing as a performance of understanding that we can then evaluate. We grade it, and use the grade to help us calculate their final grade for the course. In an ideal world, students would be so enthusiastic about the opportunity to learn more deeply that they would write a great paper even if we weren't grading it. But the grade definitely motivates them to spend more time—which enables them to learn more—which then justifies the higher grade that they earn.

Another means of combatting grade inflation is directly to discount grades where there is evidence of inflation. In response to the evidence of Ontario's widespread grade inflation, for example, McGill University has decided that students from Ontario will have their grades deflated by seven percent to achieve greater fairness for students applying from other provinces (Deuck, 2014). Israel takes a somewhat similar approach to evidence of school-level grade inflation. Each grade on the Israeli matriculation certificate is a blend of the student's score on the Bagrut, a standardized matriculation exam, and the Magen grade— a final grade, also called "the protective grade," assigned by the teacher. The purposes of the protective grade are to reflect students' knowledge, to reduce chances of their failure due to stress or excitement during the matriculation exam, and to prepare them for the Bagrut by giving them a similar exam in advance (Israeli Ministry of Economy, 2015). Yet, in cases of significant disparities between the school protective grades and matriculation grades, the Ministry of Education applies a differential weighting, reducing or increasing the

weight of the protective grades accordingly (Israeli Ministry of Economy, 2015). There are appealing features of this approach, not least that it attempts to negate the unfair advantage accrued by grade inflation, but it is also a disturbingly blunt instrument. First, it harms individual students when the problem is the system. Second, it is unable to distinguish among students within the offending system who have benefitted from grade inflation versus those who haven't; it simply downgrades them all. Third, it makes it impossible for even the best students to have their accomplishments recognized, as their scores will be deflated as well.

Standardize Assessments

In the face of these problems especially with teacher- and school-sponsored grade inflation, some people turn to standardized assessments as the answer. But standardization of assessment and marking schemes—at least, in the absence of massive additional redistributive initiatives—does not solve the problem. In countries around the globe, scores on standardized assessments are statistically incredibly highly correlated with socioeconomic status (SES). This is true for state tests, the SAT, and AP exams in the US, for instance, and for GCSE, A-level, and honours degree scores in the UK (Deputy Prime Minister's Office, 2015, Section 8; Furry & Hecsh, 2001; Sackett, Kuncel, Arneson, Cooper, & Waters, 2009; Smith & Naylor, 2001). Students in England who are eligible to receive free school meals, for example, are three times less likely to earn the minimum qualification of five grade-C or above GCSEs than are students who do not qualify for free school meals. Hence, grades or marks, whether standardized or teacher-generated, and whether assigned by external or internal evaluators, reinforce extant social inequalities among children and youth, who by definition under any plausible ethical or political theory are not responsible for their initial social positions.

Arguably, these two ways in which grades reinforce existing unjust patterns of socioeconomic stratification are very different, with quite different ethical standing as a result. Disparities in US grading practices thanks to non-standardization (e.g. grade inflation) reveal that grades are unreliable as they are currently constructed, and hence fail to distribute opportunity appropriately. Insofar as they are unreliable in ways that directly correlate with SES—such that the rich literally get richer thanks to more highly inflated grades, while the poor get poorer due to uninflated grades—this adds insult to injury. Such grading practices are patently unjust, and clearly need to be reformed. By contrast, the fact that students' SES significantly and directly correlates with their exam grades may show that the educational or welfare system as a whole is not up to snuff, as it is failing to provide students from different class backgrounds equal opportunities to learn. But the grades themselves may be valid and reliable, and it may well be correct to interpret exam results as showing that students from higher-SES backgrounds are more academically prepared than students from lower-SES backgrounds. In this respect, grading practices themselves are not at fault; rather, society as a whole is at fault for failing adequately to promote lower-income students' learning opportunities.

There is good evidence, however, to suggest that SES disparities even in standardized exam success are at least partially due to invalid or unreliable aspects of the assessments and grading schemes. Even psychometrically validated exams of specific subject-matter competency inevitably assess additional skills and knowledge that are not the intended focus of the assessment: these may include English language fluency and confidence, adherence to local cultural and academic norms, certain forms of cultural and social capital, and even legible handwriting. They also impose differential burdens on different groups of students, as some students must overcome stereotype threat in order to do well on an exam, for example (and hence their capacity to overcome stereotype threat is also a skill that is being implicitly tested), while others do not suffer such threat in the first place.

We do not mean to suggest that grades on standardized exams are strongly biased, nor hence that the information they convey is as unreliable and inequitable as inflated grades can be. Insofar as the correlation

between students' SES and their academic attainment is one of the most stubbornly persistent and pervasive features of schooling in many systems, however, we suggest that replacing teacher-assigned grades with standardized assessment scores is not an appealing means of combatting grade inflation.

Reform the Entire System

A quite different approach to combatting grade inflation is to abandon grades altogether and give feedback via narrative reports. Hampshire, Evergreen State, Fairhaven, and Goddard Colleges, for instance, are all selective colleges in the United States that provide narrative assessments rather than grades. But this only works if faculty teach relatively few students overall so they can write informative, original reports for each student. The University of Santa Cruz, by contrast, has abandoned its historical commitment to narrative assessments in favor of grades because of increasing demands on faculty time, rising class sizes, and decreasing confidence in the use or originality of narrative assessments in an age of "cut-and-paste" word processing. The trends are even more discouraging at the high school level. One researcher was able to find only five US high schools in 2008 that used solely narrative assessments; by 2014, this number seems to be down to one or two (Bagley, 2008).[13]

Even more radically, one could advocate for education, social, economic, labor, health, and other reforms so that education does not have positional effects across every aspect of individuals' lives (health, marriage, income, etc.) and across their lifespans. We avidly support such changes. Perhaps new approaches to hiring will contribute to such reforms. For example, Google has recently adopted a policy that deemphasizes college transcripts in favor of demonstrable skills on the grounds that an "academic setting is an artificial place where people are highly trained to succeed only in a specific environment" (Nisen, 2013). That said, we (to put it mildly) do not believe such advocacy is an efficient, or even a plausible, approach to addressing the very specific ethical challenge of grade inflation.

Conclusion

Where does this leave us? It is important to note that—in the spirit of many dilemmas of practical ethics, and of normative case study research—even though we have co-authored this article, the two of us find ourselves in somewhat different places at the end of the day. One of us (Finefter-Rosenbluh) favors a combination of standardized testing and stricter criterion-referenced grading—as well as greater respect for teachers who are trying to insist on high standards in the face of entitled parents and compliant administrators—in order to combat grade inflation. The other of us (Levinson) views grade inflation as an inevitable, but also relatively minor, symptom of a more generally corrupted system devoted to credentialism, stratification, and the entrenchment of extant inequalities. Levinson would not spend much, if any, effort combatting grade inflation directly, whereas Finefter-Rosenbluh would. Although we offer no definitive conclusion, therefore, to the questions of "what is wrong with grade inflation (if anything)" or what should be done as a result, we do hope that we have offered a useful initial map of the ethical terrain. We also hope that we have offered up a sufficiently provocative account of some of the challenges that other philosophers of education will accept our invitation to explore the ethical contours of grade inflation further, as it is a matter of practical import as well as intriguing normative theory.

[13] We took the list of schools included in this article and checked their current assessment policies; only Lehman Alternative Community School—notably, a public school in Ithaca, NY—still assigns no grades. We were unable to check the pseudonymized "Progressive Secondary School" studied in the article, since we do not know its actual identity.

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