

Meritocracy, Equality, and Responsibility

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INTRODUCTION

Invocations of a shared belief in a meritocratic ideal as a high-level principle of social justice are common in contemporary political and economic commentary. I aim to demonstrate that there is no such thing as a ‘meritocratic ideal’ towards which our laws and institutions must strive, but rather a commitment to equality, a commitment which is sometimes more explicit, sometimes less, and which is not necessarily recognized by all of those who share it. I will argue that there is a sense in which belief in meritocracy is motivated by concern for equality, and that, in some ways, meritocracy is simply a widely held but ultimately mistaken rule for sorting just from unjust departures from equality.

In the first section that follows, I attempt to define meritocracy in the sense which is most relevant to distributive justice, and distinguish between two ways of formulating the meritocratic principle. Next, I criticize the first (inequality-promoting) formulation, and offer a qualified defense of the second (inequality-prohibiting) formulation. This negative or critical interpretation of meritocracy

bears a formal resemblance to the theory of luck egalitarianism, and seems to be motivated by a similar intuition; I attempt to illustrate these similarities. The next section, ‘Responsibility and Desert’, makes a case for preferring luck egalitarianism to meritocracy on the grounds that the former takes account of personal choice and responsibility in a way that the latter does not. One final defense of meritocracy, untouched by the responsibility objection, can be mounted by utilitarianism; I answer this case with a counterargument borrowed from G. A. Cohen’s criticism of the Rawlsian argument for an incentives-based justification of inequality. And in the final section, ‘Principles and Negotiation’, another argument from Cohen provides an analogy for the way in which, despite the differences between the two theories, believers in luck egalitarianism (or in egalitarianism more generally) might find a practical political use for the meritocratic principle.

WHAT IS MERITOCRACY?

The word ‘meritocracy’ does not refer unambiguously to any one idea. The technology industry centered metonymically on Silicon Valley styles itself a meritocracy, which seems to mean only that there is (or is purported to be) a norm governing staffing decisions which dictates that candidates be selected based only on considerations of skill level and projected ability, rather than gender, ethnic background, country of origin, or other factors which are irrelevant to the performance of the job. On a smaller scale, certain firms or organizations call themselves meritocracies, for similar reasons, maintaining that advancement and compensation are based solely on performance and achievement. And on a larger scale, the idea of a meritocracy of power or authority dictates that greater interpersonal influence and decision-making authority ought to accrue to those who, through innate intelligence, achieved education, hard-won wisdom, or something else, are more likely to make accurate predictions and beneficial decisions on behalf of the society that they govern. This kind of meritocracy is related to a distributive meritocracy in so far as reward, as a matter of empirical fact, is strongly positively correlated with authority and influence. But in its purely political form, as a method for selecting leaders and rulers, it is beyond the scope of this paper, and I will ignore it.

Meritocracy as a principle of distributive justice is the normative belief that society ought to be structured so that, as far as is possible, greater rewards accrue to those we identify as more deserving of merit — or, to put it slightly differently, that there ought to be no inequalities in material condition which are not caused by or explained by relevant inequalities in the traits and qualities that are constitutive of merit. (These two formulations, which I call the positive and the negative, will be refined below.)

Distributive meritocracy (which I will, from this point on, refer to simply as

meritocracy, to save space) is a theory about what is just. Thus it would seem to fall squarely within the traditional subject matter of political philosophy. However, full-throated philosophical defenses of meritocracy are relatively rare. Luck egalitarianism, prioritarianism, Rawlsian liberalism, Nozickian libertarianism, and many other theories of distributive justice have their proponents and their canonical statements. But meritocracy is most often discussed by politicians, economists, journalists, and other non-philosophical commentators.

It is my contention that meritocracy, as a theory, stands in a relation to these other political-philosophical theories which is analogous to Paul Churchland's relation between 'folk psychology' and (a yet to develop) 'completed neuroscience'.¹ Just as even the preliminary findings of current neuroscience are enough to reveal large inconsistencies and inadequacies in our common-sense picture of the workings of the mind, these better-developed theories of distributive justice reveal meritocracy to be unworkable as an ideal theory or a high-level principle of justice. And just as folk psychology is held by Churchland to be a full-fledged theory about the workings of the mind, but a 'radically false' one, meritocracy is, in my view, a theory of distributive justice, with (if it were true) the same normative force as a theory like egalitarianism, but also a radically false one, because it rests on a mistaken conception of the relationship between merit and the dimension of responsibility which properly provides a foundation for moral judgment.

As a folk philosophy, meritocracy has relatively few defenders among philosophers. One statement of the theory comes from David Miller, who defines meritocracy as 'the ideal of a society in which each person's chance to acquire positions of advantage and the rewards that go with them will depend entirely on his or her talent and effort'.² On the support for meritocracy, Miller continues, appealing to public opinion (in a way that offers support for at least the 'folk' part of my claim that meritocracy is folk philosophy):

The merit principle seems to have a firm grounding in popular thinking about justice: it corresponds to the widespread belief that people deserve to enjoy unequal incomes depending on their abilities and how hard they work.³

The meritocratic principle can be stated positively, as a prescription for certain desirable reasons for inequality, or negatively, as a reason to believe that certain causes of inequality are unjust and thus, for that reason, to some extent undesirable. (Unjust procedures may, of course, be preferred to certain even more unjust

¹'Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes'

²*Principles of Social Justice*, p. 177.

³*Ibid.*, p. 178. In fairness, I should mention that Miller, in a chapter titled 'Two Cheers for Meritocracy', is offering a qualified philosophical defense of meritocracy, and would presumably not agree with my characterization.

procedures, or, from an end-state perspective, such as that of utilitarianism, outcomes that are procedurally unjust may still be preferable to procedurally just, but otherwise inferior, states of affairs.) I will argue that while the negative version of the meritocratic theory is useful as a restraint on certain undesirable forms of inequality, the positive version is unworkable, owing to difficulties in formulating precise and universally satisfactory notions of merit and desert.

Miller's definition can be restated in a way that focuses on reward, setting aside 'positions of advantage', which incorporate the elements of power and authority which are not central to my argument, and in a way that combines ability and effort under the single umbrella of merit. This restatement can take a positive or a negative form:

The positive view: Rewards ought to scale proportionally to merit; relevant differences in desert ought to result in differences in material condition. We should organize society so as to ensure, to the extent possible, that the more meritorious are given greater rewards.

The negative view: Rewards ought not be based on factors which have nothing to do with merit; there should be no differences in material condition which are not caused or explained by relevant differences in desert. We should organize society so as to ensure, to the extent possible, that there are no differences in reward which do not reflect differences in merit.

THE POSITIVE CASE

On its face, the positive interpretation has some appeal. Those who believe in the behavior-influencing power of economic incentives might be disposed to view a program which rewards merit as something of a merit-production program — by placing an income premium on intelligence, diligence, skill, and the like, the structure of our society thereby encourages the development of these virtues. Not only does this presumably make for a better-functioning society, which then produces the misery-alleviating and happiness-promoting effects which are among the goals of good governance, but these virtues are also, to the possessors, valuable for their own sake, which means that, by composition effects, our society in the aggregate is improved by improvements to its constituent parts.

Which brings us to the first of several problems with our scheme. Why should people deserve to be rewarded for possessing things that are already, in themselves, valuable? This is, in John Stuart Mill's words, 'giving to those who have, assigning most to those who are already most favoured by nature'⁴ — and a case

⁴*Principles of Political Economy*, reprinted 2008, p. 19.

could equally be made for instead doing the opposite, materially compensating the unintelligent, the indolent, and the unwise for their lack of certain desirable qualities. And if we count moral excellence among the constituents of merit, we may be led into something of a regress. Imagine, first, that contrary to the lessons of psychometrics, education, and organization theory, such qualities as intelligence, educational attainment, common sense, wisdom, and diligence can be precisely quantified. If high-achieving Alice displays an above-average share of all of these meritorious qualities, but decides to refuse some of the extra income that is due to her as reward for her above-average merit — motivated, say, by an altruistic desire to free up resources for use by the rest of society — then she is, by the logic of meritocracy, due an even larger share, by virtue of her uncommonly fine moral character. And if she refuses this additional compensation, her level of desert increases again, and continues, stepwise, to increase with each subsequent demurral, until she has become a ‘merit monster’,⁵ with a claim on an infinite amount of resources. (This claim is unrealizable, of course, because at such time as she elects to call it in, she ceases to deserve it.)

A second difficulty with the idea of rewards for talent is the impossibility of disentangling accidents, of birth or otherwise, from chosen, cultivated, or otherwise intentional merit. Unchosen factors which are likely to influence intelligence and other traits we consider meritorious include not only genetics but environmental factors such as nutrition or lead pollution. Attaching moral significance to the random actions of chance seems to make nonsense of rationality-based notions of morality. (This, not incidentally, is the intuition that motivates luck egalitarianism, and is, as will be seen below, the key difference between the two theories.)

A third problem arises from the practical consequences of carrying out such a program of rewards for (at least partially) unchosen merit. The psychological effects on those who are at the lower end of the income scale would be unhealthy, to say the least — after all, those who lack reward, if our scheme is well implemented, can reasonably conclude that they lack merit in proportion. This is perhaps not a problem that is unique to meritocracy, but meritocracy’s connecting of income with personal virtue lends to poverty a punitive character, whereas, say, a serf in a feudal system might rather feel fatalistically resigned to a station that was inherited and unimprovable, irrespective of virtue or desert.

More controversially, provided that talent or intelligence are sufficiently influenced by genetic factors, a hereditary upper class might become self-perpetuating and harden into a permanent caste. If the innately intelligent and talented succeed, thanks to the workings of meritocracy, in becoming society’s upper class, they will, through assortative mating, produce offspring who are similarly above-average in talent and intelligence, while the less well-off will be increasingly denied

⁵On analogy with the ‘utility monster’ of Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, p. 41.

access to what might be called genetic resources, thus ensuring that (again, to the extent that talent and intelligence are genetic in origin, which is by no means a closed case) their own offspring will lack the ‘merit’ which would provide their entrée into the upper class. And those who deny that there is any appreciable sense in which talent or intelligence are deterministically ‘pre-programmed’ might still be worried by the differential access to education represented by the private school system, which converts family resources into superior education, which in turn, under a meritocracy, leads to a larger share of future resources, resulting in a positive feedback loop which amplifies the differences between classes.⁶

Fourth, if the meritocratic scheme is imperfectly implemented — if, say, some existing differences in compensation owe to merit, and others to such non-merit causes as theft, corruption, abuse of power, or simple inheritance — then the moral veneer of meritocracy lends undeserved respectability to thieves, double-dealers, abusers of power, and the born rich. In a market-economy society widely believed to be driven by meritocratic principles, the most amply rewarded will be tempted to reason backwards from their high status and assume that success is proof of virtue, and merit might easily come to be tacitly redefined as ‘whatever the market rewards’.

While Robert Nozick was, of course, no meritocrat — it is not open to endowment theorists like Nozick to mount a meritocratic defense of their theory, because rewards under Nozickian libertarianism are obtained not through patterned distributions like meritocracy, but through accidents of endowment and the aggregated happenstance of market transactions — his famous Wilt Chamberlain thought experiment⁷ depends for much of its rhetorical force in justifying huge inequalities on its invocation of athletic ability, which many of us seem intuitively to regard as an unproblematic example of meritorious talent — whereas a story about a state-licensed monopolist, a rent-seeking controller of scarce resources, or a well-connected negotiator might be more representative of what actually earns outsized rewards in unregulated markets.

Economists Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Stefanie Stantcheva studied the recent sharp rise in executive compensation, and found that merit, as typically conceived, had little to do with the explanation:

⁶This paragraph and the preceding one owe much to Michael Young, whose *Rise of the Meritocracy* is responsible for introducing the term to English-language commentators — and to Brian Barry’s discussion of Young’s book, and of the problems with regarding the heritability of IQ as a sort of biological predetermination, in Chapter 9 of his *Why Social Justice Matters*.

⁷*Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 161–163. Here Nozick’s argument is based not on talent but on the supposed impossibility of just steps (in this case, freely contracted transactions) producing unjust outcomes. Though the argument makes no explicit use of the meritoriousness of Chamberlain’s athletic talent, it does seem to help itself to a bit of meritocratic flavor, which lends undue respectability to the situation of the economic high flyers whose position it seeks to justify.

Our findings suggest that skyrocketing executive pay is fairly well explained by the bargaining model (lower marginal tax rates encourage executives to negotiate harder for higher pay) and does not have much to do with a hypothetical increase in managerial productivity. We again found that the elasticity of executive pay is greater with respect to “luck” (that is, variations in earnings that cannot have been due to executive talent, because, for instance, other firms in the same sector did equally well) than with respect to “talent” (variations not explained by sector variables) ... [T]his finding poses serious problems for the view that high executive pay is a reward for good performance.⁸

Thus not only are the mechanisms that produce today’s economic superstars rather less intuitively admirable than Wilt Chamberlain’s athletic talent, but the sums involved make Chamberlain’s \$250,000 salary, even adjusted for inflation,⁹ seem modestly upper-middle-class by comparison.

THE NEGATIVE CASE

The positive program of meritocracy suffers from defects in conception, as well as difficulties in implementation. However, as a restraining influence on inequalities of condition which result from more obviously unjust sources, such as nepotism, corruption, theft, and fraud, as well as sources which are morally neutral yet arbitrary, such as luck, the negative formulation of the meritocratic program may prove useful.

It is my contention that the intuitive appeal of meritocracy rests on this (often implicit) contrast with other, less fair methods of distribution. In common usage, the topic of meritocracy is unlikely to arise in the context of a society which is in search of a whole-cloth system for determining the justice of various distributions. It is, rather, typically invoked as an alternative to, or a reminder to seek certain remedies for, a system in which, for example, entrenched and self-reinforcing class privilege prevents social mobility. The American economist Joseph Stiglitz writes, with an emphasis on meritocracy as an engine of social mobility:

⁸ *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, p. 512.

⁹ According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm), Chamberlain’s salary, assuming it would have been effective in 1974, the year of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*’s publication, is equivalent to a little more than \$1.2 million in 2015 dollars. During the 2015–2016 basketball season, the Cleveland Cavaliers paid LeBron James nearly \$23 million (<http://espn.go.com/nba/salaries>), a figure that would suffice to place him at 57th on the Equilar/New York Times list of America’s two hundred most highly paid chief executives (<http://www.equilar.com/nytimes200>).

Our skyrocketing inequality — so contrary to our meritocratic ideal of America as a place where anyone with hard work and talent can “make it” — means that those who are born to parents of limited means are likely never to live up to their potential.¹⁰

Thomas Piketty, in a vein that more closely resembles the concerns of this paper:

Our democratic societies rest on a meritocratic worldview, or at any rate a meritocratic hope, by which I mean a belief in a society in which inequality is based more on merit and effort than on kinship and rents.¹¹

I include these quotations not as an appeal to the authority of economists but as examples of statements of meritocratic principle as they appear ‘in the wild’, in non-philosophical usage. Both Stiglitz and Piketty define meritocracy negatively, as a principle which determines certain causes of inequality to be unjust. In the negative or critical formulation, meritocracy is instructive not so much for the justified inequalities which it prescribes, but for the unjust inequalities that it *proscribes*: on a weak interpretation of the negative view, meritocracy merely forbids any inequality stemming from a cause that is socially undesirable, immoral, or otherwise undeserving of merit; on a stronger interpretation, meritocracy forbids all of the above, plus those inequalities with morally neutral or arbitrary causes, such as those produced by chance, or by any relevant difference between agents that is not (or would not rationally be) chosen by the agents themselves.

Phrased negatively, as a statement about what kind of inequalities ought to be forbidden, and given an expansive interpretation, as forbidding not only morally bad sources of inequality but neutral or arbitrary ones as well, meritocracy bears a certain formal resemblance to the doctrine(s) of luck egalitarianism, as espoused by Richard Arneson, G. A. Cohen, Ronald Dworkin, and others. Thus the folk philosophy that is meritocracy, when suitably revised, begins to approach a view that is squarely in the mainstream of contemporary political philosophy.

LUCK EGALITARIANISM

From Cohen’s ‘Luck and Equality’, a statement of the luck-egalitarian position:

What have come to be known as “luck egalitarians” focus on the *difference* between people’s advantages, and they count that difference just

¹⁰ *The Great Divide: Unequal Societies and What We Can Do About Them*, p. 389.

¹¹ *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, p. 422.

if and only if it accords with a certain pattern in the relevant people's choices'.¹²

In 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', Cohen elaborates on the motif of responsibility and choice:

A person is *exploited* when unfair advantage is taken of him, and he suffers from (bad) *brute luck* when his bad luck is not the result of a gamble or risk which he could have avoided. I believe that the primary egalitarian impulse is to extinguish the influence on distribution of both exploitation and brute luck.¹³

Exploitation is mentioned only for the sake of completeness, as the rest of the paper examines the distinction between brute and 'option' luck — specifically, the disagreement between Cohen and Ronald Dworkin about where to place the 'cut' that divides just or tolerable from unjust or intolerable (according to the theory) sources of inequality. For Cohen, the relevant distinction is between choice and luck, or chosen and unchosen differences between people. For Dworkin, the cut divides preference and circumstance, or preferences and resources¹⁴ — but what it has in common with Cohen's conception is that it is a test of *responsibility* which distinguishes just from unjust inequalities.

Richard Arneson decomposes the broadly construed luck-egalitarian thesis into its component parts, which he calls 'luckism' and 'egalitarianism'.

Luckism is the idea that the strength of any moral reasons there might be to alter the condition of some individual for the better or for the worse (if the latter, this is to be done for the sake of improving the condition of other individuals) can be amplified or dampened by some factor involving an assessment of individual responsibility.¹⁵

MERIT AND 'LUCKISM'

Arneson goes on to distinguish two components of luckism, *desert* and *choice*:

Desert: The badness of inequality is lessened, the more it is the case that the relative level of good fortune that people reach is proportionate to their desert.

¹²*On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice, and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*, p. 117.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁴'Equality of Resources', reprinted in *Sovereign Virtue*.

¹⁵'Luck Egalitarianism Interpreted and Defended', p. 2.

Choice: The badness of inequality is lessened, the more it is the case that inequality arises via people's voluntary choices within a fair framework for interaction.¹⁶

It is my contention that meritocracy is a variant of a desert-based conception of luck egalitarianism, one in which the various components of 'merit', be they intelligence, diligence, aptitude for learning, 'grit', or positive mental attitude, are (mistakenly) taken to constitute desert. Thus, translated into Arneson's terms, under meritocracy, the badness of inequality is lessened the more it is the case that the relative level of good fortune that people reach is proportionate to their merit. The appeal of meritocracy makes inconsistent use of the responsibility criterion of luck egalitarianism — condemning as unjust those inequalities which stem from causes for which the agents in question cannot be responsible (such as inheritance or nepotism), but failing to account for the extent to which agents cannot be held responsible for their own merit. It is a luck egalitarianism in which the 'cut' of responsibility misses the mark, ascribing to agents responsibility for virtues whose presence or absence are more or less outside their control.

There is widespread agreement among various proponents of egalitarianism, including not only luck egalitarianism but even liberal egalitarianism of the Rawlsian variety, that it is extremely difficult to disentangle traditional notions of merit from accidents of birth, circumstance, or natural endowment — in other words, to separate the components of merit for which an agent ought to be held responsible from the components which are beyond an agent's control. John Rawls, whose difference principle sometimes tolerates inequalities which exceed what a luck egalitarian would find acceptable (and which, conversely, would sometimes compensate for inequalities by which luck egalitarians might remain untroubled), nevertheless accepts both that unchosen inequalities should be rectified and that what is often called merit is actually an unchosen and undeserved endowment:

[W]e may observe that the difference principle gives some weight to the considerations singled out by the principle of redress. This is the principle that undeserved inequalities call for redress; and since inequalities of birth and natural endowment are undeserved, these inequalities are to be somehow compensated for.¹⁷

By 'inequalities of birth and natural endowment', presumably, Rawls means not only the unchosen accident of being born into a certain social class or set of economic circumstances, but also that portion of intelligence, talent, and capacity for learning which is inborn, or inculcated in the family, or inherited in a loose sense which includes both biologically deterministic and environmentally

¹⁶Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁷*A Theory of Justice*, 1999, p. 86.

contingent (family-environment) inheritance. A meritocrat seeks to reward the intelligent and the talented, regardless of the source of their endowment; Rawls would be careful to avoid doing so, and would seek to compensate accordingly those who lack these endowments.

Cohen agrees, and in the course of criticizing Rawls's difference principle as too lax in its tolerance of certain inequalities, also argues that it is incoherent to reward high achievers for the extra effort required by their difficult and demanding careers because, to a great extent, this extra effort is itself highly enjoyable and intrinsically rewarding.¹⁸ And among the central tenets of Marxist thought is the belief that productive labor is essential to human nature — anyone who has practiced a skill or talent at a high level can attest that the determined exercise of ability is not uniformly enervating or draining, but in fact just as likely to be invigorating, either physically, mentally, or both.

The point is not to show how far apart meritocracy and egalitarianism are. Rather, the point is to show that if luck egalitarians are right about just how few of the elements of merit can defensibly be separated from the kinds of unchosen endowments that ought not result in inequality, meritocrats should narrow their list accordingly, and the two positions should come to overlap in content as well as form. In short: if meritocracy aims to permit only inequalities that are due to morally relevant differences in merit or desert, and all unchosen differences are morally arbitrary and thus irrelevant, then a suitably corrected meritocracy permits only inequalities that are due to differences in merit that are the result of choices — which leaves it entirely equivalent to luck egalitarianism.

The fact that the two theories can, with certain refinements, be made to overlap so neatly may not be a coincidence. (Nor, as I hope I have demonstrated, is it the result of an unreasonably tendentious reading of meritocracy.) Both are motivated by an aversion to inequalities except under very limited circumstances — which strongly suggests that both are motivated by a presumption of equality, with departures allowed only under exceptional conditions, the distinction between the two resting entirely on the meritocrats' acceptance of a set of mistaken assertions about merit and desert. If so, this is good news for egalitarians, and not only luck egalitarians, but anyone concerned with reducing eliminating equalities of material condition — for the egalitarian position is revealed, to the extent that meritocrats are to be counted as belonging to the egalitarian cause, to enjoy more widespread support than is commonly thought, even if not all of this support is explicitly stated (or even consciously acknowledged).

¹⁸*Rescuing Justice and Equality*, p. 107, including footnote 50, where Cohen finds agreement from Rawls himself.

RESPONSIBILITY AND DESERT

What is it that allows us to say that luck egalitarians are right and meritocrats are wrong about responsibility as a criterion for merit and desert? Why should we prefer a theory that assigns moral relevance only to those acts, choices, or virtues for which agents bear (at least some) personal responsibility?

This is a question that threatens, if pursued to the edges of the debate about free will, to escape into metaphysics, and has long been recognized to be central to the foundations of ethics. To put it one way, how is it possible to identify an action as praiseworthy or blameworthy if the actor could not have acted differently — or, to translate into the terms of the meritocracy debate, how can a trait or attribute be identified as meritorious or meretricious if the subject bears no genuine personal responsibility for the acquisition or maintenance of the virtue or vice in question?

Kant, like many other philosophers, took as fundamental the notion that the concept of responsibility was needed to make sense of moral judgments — he assumed, in the famous formulation, that *ought* implies *can*. Kant's metaphysical project required a conclusion about the nature and origin of free will that he takes to follow from this premise, and about which we can remain agnostic. At any rate, what matters here is that the presumption that moral judgments require responsibility was secure enough that it could be drafted into service as a premise for a far-reaching metaphysical argument.

Derek Parfit's distillation of Kant's argument is useful for its clarity and economy.¹⁹

Kant's argument can be stated as follows:

- (A) Our acts cannot be wrong unless we ought to have acted differently.
- (B) 'Ought' implies 'can'. We ought to have acted differently only if we could have acted differently.

Therefore

- (C) Our acts cannot be wrong unless we could have acted differently.
- (D) If our acts were merely events in the spatio-temporal world, these acts would be causally determined, so it would never be true that we could have acted differently.

¹⁹All of the indented material that follows is reprinted from *On What Matters*, Volume 1, pp. 258–259.

Therefore

- (E) If our acts were merely such events, none of our acts would be wrong, so morality would be an illusion.
- (F) Morality is not an illusion. We ought to act in certain ways, and some of our acts are wrong.

Therefore

- (G) Our acts are not merely events in the spatio-temporal world.

Kant's ultimate aim is to demonstrate the existence of a noumenal world, separate from deterministic physical reality, within which human freedom operates, which is obviously much farther than my argument needs to go. In this context the point is simply to illustrate that Kant must have taken steps A through C, which are essentially a statement of the thesis that moral judgments cannot operate without genuine responsibility on the part of the relevant agents, to be entirely secure, if he meant them to form the premises of an argument the conclusion of which is that the phenomenal world, which constitutes the entirety of our human experience, is not all that there is.

Peter Strawson, in a very different way, illustrates the essential role played by responsibility in our moral reasoning — not just our philosophical theories, but our commonsense, everyday ascriptions of blame and praise, and a great many of what he calls 'personal reactive attitudes'. In 'Freedom and Resentment', Strawson argues that, were free will to turn out to be an illusion, it is 'not absolutely inconceivable' that we might be able to regard one another as lacking genuine moral responsibility, the way we regard children, or certain developmentally disabled or mentally ill people, as being to some degree exempt from ordinary ascriptions of responsibility for their actions. 'But', Strawson continues, 'I am strongly inclined to think that it is, for us as we are, practically inconceivable'.²⁰ The ability to make moral judgments based on ascriptions of responsibility, and the ability to forbear, when it is rational to do so, from such ascriptions — in other words, membership in a 'moral community' — is too basic a requirement of our everyday social interaction to do without.

My argument, of course, does not depend on the truth of any thesis about determinism or the causal closure of the physical world. But what makes merit unsatisfying as a criterion for desert and reward is the fact that so many of its constituent parts are unchosen and thus not the responsibility of the agent — not in a strong, deterministic-universe, causal-closure sense, but in a weaker, counterfactual, it-could-not-have-been-otherwise sense which retains its aspect of unfreedom

²⁰'Freedom and Resentment', *Free Will*, ed. Gary Watson, p. 81.

even in a world of freely willed action. To the extent that intelligence, aptitude for learning, diligence, and the like are either strongly heritable, which is to say genetic in origin, or weakly heritable, meaning inculcated in early family life, their acquisition and development are not the responsibility of the agent, and therefore they do not constitute the sort of differences that can reasonably be thought to have normative implications. To the extent that meritocrats maintain that an agent is entirely responsible, in a morally relevant sense, for such unchosen attributes as intelligence, aptitude for learning, diligence, and the like, they are mistaken; to the extent that they deny that the issue of responsibility has any bearing on the relationship between desert and what they call merit, they deny that desert, reward, and distributive justice are moral questions in the first place.

THE UTILITARIAN DEFENSE

Which brings us to an exception — an ethical framework in which desert, in the virtue-oriented moral sense used above, is replaced by something like expediency, or an entitlement dictated by maximally utility-producing institutions. From the perspective of utilitarianism, meritocracy might still, after all of the above, be seen as preferable to more strictly egalitarian principles, on account of the state of affairs that its adherence brings about. Meritocracy’s promise of greater rewards to the more talented and hard-working can serve to motivate these high achievers to develop their talents to the greatest possible extent and to exercise them with the greatest possible diligence. The result may very possibly be a better state of affairs for everyone in society: both for the meritorious, who are materially rewarded for their ability and effort, and for the rest of society’s members, who, though they may suffer from the relative inequality brought on by the ascent of the meritorious, might very well benefit in absolute terms from technological or other innovations produced by society’s high achievers, innovations which these high achievers might not have been sufficiently motivated to produce under a scheme which would not have promised them a differential reward. Thus the *relative* immiseration produced by inequality, often described by leftists as a zero-sum proposition whereby the winners win at the expense of the losers, taking a larger share of a fixed pool of resources and leaving less behind, can be mitigated by ‘growing the pie’, or producing an *absolute* society-wide improvement in material condition, so that even after the high flyers have extracted their outsized share, more resources remain for society’s members to divide.²¹

This claim is difficult to rebut from within the framework of utilitarianism. If the outcome, in terms of aggregate welfare, is what matters, then concerns exter-

²¹I thank my dissertation advisor, Michael Garnett, for bringing the utilitarian argument for meritocracy to my attention.

nal to aggregate welfare, such as the fairness or unfairness of the processes that produce the outcomes, are irrelevant. To show that the inequalities allowed under meritocracy are unjust, a critic must show that a superior state of affairs can be brought about without allowing these inequalities. Again, G. A. Cohen's criticism of John Rawls provides a model. Rawls's difference principle permits those inequalities which improve the condition of the worst off. This is a prioritarian view, focusing only on the condition of those at the bottom, rather than an aggregative view of the sort demanded by utilitarianism, which concerns itself with total or average welfare. But this disanalogy can be set aside for the purposes of the present argument, for what matters is that both the difference principle and the utilitarian argument for meritocracy permit inequalities because these inequalities, or the mechanisms that produce these inequalities, bring about what the theory judges to be a superior outcome — for utilitarians, an increase in aggregate utility, and for Rawlsians, an improvement to the condition of the worst off (and only incidentally the best off).

Cohen's argument against the incentives justification for inequality²² is that it is the high achievers themselves who *make it the case* that extra incentives are required to motivate them to realize their talents, to apply themselves with diligence, and thus to bring about the state of affairs which benefits the groups in question (in the Rawlsian case, the worst off; in the utilitarian case, society in the aggregate). If the talented and hard-working could do without these extra incentives, they could provide even more benefit to society: not only could they produce the surplus which constitutes the original benefit to society, but they could also forego their additional compensation, returning it to the pool of resources available to society. In the utilitarian case, the return of the compensation would be resource-neutral in the aggregate, leaving the size of the resource pool unchanged, which is neither a win or a loss for utilitarians — but if we can assume that inequality, in itself, has at least some welfare-reducing effects, then the aggregate welfare can be improved to the extent that the returned compensation makes society more equal. Therefore, by choosing to act in the way that the extra incentives are designed to encourage them to work, while refusing the incentives themselves, high achievers can bring about states of affairs which are preferable, from a utilitarian perspective, to those brought about by meritocracy. Thus, even on utilitarianism's own terms, meritocracy can be defeated by equality.

As Cohen acknowledges, it may be no small matter to acquire the disposition of someone who can respond to hypothetical incentives without actually receiving those incentives. We may not be so constituted, psychologically, as to be able to excel purely for the pleasure of excelling, or to take as its own reward the knowledge

²²This argument occupies the entire first chapter of *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, and has necessarily been greatly condensed here.

that we have improved the condition of society. In Cohen's work, this is not so much a pessimistic conclusion, or an objection on the grounds of psychological plausibility, as it is an appeal to the role of personal responsibility in political philosophy, and to the difficulty of constructing a system that manufactures moral outcomes from amoral (or immoral) actions.

PRINCIPLES AND NEGOTIATION

As we have seen, despite deep logical and practical faults, meritocracy enjoys relatively wide popular support. In contrast, luck egalitarianism is a well-studied and well-defended theory — though by no means a proven or uncontroversial one — and yet its popular impact, compared with meritocracy, is negligible. Both theories, as I hope I have demonstrated, begin from a presumption that equality, in the absence of other considerations, is a just state of affairs, distributionally speaking. They differ most noticeably on the matter of exactly what considerations are relevant in justifying departures from equality. This relationship between meritocracy and egalitarianism means that meritocracy might be of some use to luck (and other) egalitarians in the arena of practical politics.

For a political actor to present a compromise as though it were an ideal is to begin negotiations from an already weakened position. It is the nature of political compromise that the ideals which motivate our political actions ought to lie, in practical terms, 'off the table' entirely. This is the argument of Cohen's 'Back to Socialist Basics'²³ — that the successes of the right-wing political parties of the 1970s and 1980s owe much to their willingness to advance theories which are 'crazy' if taken as practical proposals, but which, as distant, uncompromising ideals, provide principled grounds for incremental advances towards the ultimate goals depicted by those ideals. Just as the absolutely unrestrained free-market capitalism which is apparently desired by the Right lies beyond the realm of practical politics, so too should the principles that animate the Left lie beyond the range of policies which would be practicably attainable within an ideologically diverse democracy. Those leftists, in other words, who use pious reminders of a shared belief in meritocracy as a rhetorical means of restraining the most egregiously unmeritocratic inequalities might benefit from adopting a stronger position: they might instead invoke a strict (luck or otherwise) interpretation of egalitarianism as an ideal, implicitly offering meritocracy, as it is commonly understood and accepted, as a practicable compromise.

Meritocracy, then, might be best viewed not a distant star by which to navigate, a pure ideal which will be necessarily diluted in the arena of practical politics, but

²³Reprinted as Chapter 10 of *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice, and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*.

as a second-best rule of thumb which, however faulty, has in common with luck egalitarianism that it attempts to sort the more from the less unjust causes of inequality — and has the political advantage of already enjoying wide popular support. It thus becomes something of a stalking horse for luck egalitarianism, a partial and semi-covert defense of the idea that unearned disadvantages ought to be compensated and unearned advantages ought not be enshrined within a conception of a just society.

CONCLUSION

Meritocracy as a theory of distributive justice is ‘folk philosophy’ — it depends for much of its appeal on widely held but unexamined and in fact mistaken notions of merit and desert. Much of what constitutes merit is unchosen by those who possess it, and is thus morally arbitrary, and so cannot serve as a normative justification of differential rewards. Additionally, much of what constitutes merit is enjoyable or otherwise valuable for its own sake, which might just as reasonably suggest that it is those who lack ‘merit’ who ought to be suitably compensated for its absence by a just societal order.

The moral intuition that animates a belief in meritocracy, however, is arguably the same intuition that motivates luck egalitarianism — that differences in material condition or reward ought to be explainable by or caused by morally relevant differences between the situations of the agents in question. Or, to phrase it negatively, that inequalities owing to morally arbitrary or blameworthy differences — from chance to wrongdoing and everything in between — are to be considered unjust. What tells in favor of preferring luck egalitarianism to meritocracy is simply that luck egalitarianism correctly sorts these factors into categories of moral relevance and irrelevance.

This intuitional equivalence can be exploited in the arena of practical politics in two ways. First, it should add to the courage of egalitarians’ convictions to learn that they can count those segments of the public who explicitly espouse or accept meritocracy as their (tacit or potential) supporters. And meritocrats who come to accept this picture of the relationship between meritocracy and (however qualified) equality should revise their rhetorical aims to take advantage of the fact that meritocracy is a compromised and incomplete version of the egalitarian ideal — they ought to aim for equality with an eye towards accepting meritocracy as a compromise, rather than aim only half as high and end up accepting some compromise between the professed ideal of meritocracy and other, even more unjust, distributive schemes.

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