Back to the future: Old values for a new (more equal) world

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A B S T R A C T

Inequality has become a defining feature of our time and concerns are growing that artificial intelligence, human-enhancement and global ecological breakdown could cause levels to spiral upwards. Although public disapproval of current inequalities is widespread, studies also show that people don't desire equality, but prefer 'fair', still significant inequalities. Here, I argue these preferences are rooted in ideals of meritocracy and intuitive notions of free will; values that'll become increasingly tenuous in a future of human enhancement, where they could legitimise mass inequalities. Maintaining an illusion of free will is often argued to be needed to dis-incentivise immoral behaviour, but it also creates a vicious feedback: It provides social legitimacy to substantial inequalities, which exacerbate precisely those immoral behaviours that the illusion is intended to mitigate. However, meritocratic values, and their foundational notion of individual agency, are neither natural nor inevitable – they're mediated by social practices. To see what *egalitarian practices* may look like, I review the rich anthropology literature on egalitarian societies. This highlights an irony, in that the meritocratic ideals proposed by contemporary politicians as a remedy to entrenched inequalities are the same values seen as the origin of inequality in existing egalitarian societies around the world.

1. Introduction

Inequality has become a defining feature of our time (Piketty, 2015) and an issue high on the political agenda. But in 2017, the paper *Why people prefer unequal societies* entered the debate, clearly aiming to agitate. The main thesis of Starmans, Sheskin, and Bloom (2017), however, is less controversial than it first seems. Drawing upon a wealth of evidence, they claim that most people aren't averse to inequality: what they really care about is unfairness. Further, they claim that '*when fairness and equality clash, people prefer fair inequality over unfair equality*' (*ibid, p1*). They show these issues are often confounded as laboratory studies don't always distinguish between them. Studies that distribute resources between subjects unequally with no good explanation tend to find people act to equalize the distribution, even if this means everyone gets less (Dawes, Fowler, Johnson, McElreath, & Smirnov, 2007; Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008). Such results are often interpreted to imply that people dislike inequality, especially when journalists spread the word. But when experimenters distribute resources in proportion to effort or aptitude – some form of 'merit' – they find people prefer unequal distributions (Chevallier, Xu, Adachi, van der Henst, & Baumard, 2015; Kanngiesser & Warneken, 2012).

Such preferences aren't confined to either laboratories (García-Sánchez, Van der Toorn, Rodríguez-Bailón, & Willis, 2019; Trump, 2020) or the Global North (Bucca, 2016). Surveys have found people's 'ideal' pay ratios for CEOs to unskilled workers can be as high as 20:1 (in Taiwan), with ratios of around 8:1 in Germany, Australia, the UK and USA (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014). And a study in the USA investigating people's ideal distributions of *wealth* found substantially higher ratios (Eriksson & Simpson, 2012).

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This is not to say people believe *current* inequalities are fair. Across all nations where data exist, the inequalities people believe are fair are much lower than the levels they *think* exist (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014; Norton & Ariely, 2011). And people vastly underestimate how large existing inequalities are (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018). There thus exists a widespread desire for more equality, which is surprisingly consistent across income groups and political ideologies (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014).

But the story becomes complicated again when examining beliefs about how current inequality comes to be. When Americans are asked what factors they believe are currently most important in determining economic outcomes, at the top of the list are *hard work*, *motivation* and *education*, while at the bottom are *race*, *gender* and *luck*, followed closely by *family wealth* (Reynolds & Xian, 2014). The idea of the *American Dream* suggests the USA may be an exception, but other studies indicate that beliefs about how much inequality is considered fair and how it emerges – how much 'meritocracy' exists – are similar in many other countries (García-Sánchez, Osborne, Willis, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2020; Hadler, 2005; Osberg & Smeeding, 2006). Within countries beliefs vary in predictable ways – lower-income groups are less likely to see economic outcomes as resulting from hard work and aptitude, and vice versa for upper-income groups (Piff, Kraus, & Keltner, 2018). This has obvious implications for support for redistributive policies. But barriers to redistribution can also emerge from lower-income groups, such as '*last place aversion*', which explains why the fiercest resistance to raising legislated minimum wages sometimes comes from those making just above it (Kuziemko, Buell, Reich, & Norton, 2014).

A natural question to ask is: How do people form beliefs which lead them to consider significant inequalities to be *fair*? One theory suggests people's beliefs form in order to justify the system they're in (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). But *system justification* theories can't provide a coherent answer to studies that find people simultaneously approve of significant wealth inequalities and express high disapproval of the current system. An opposing theory is that people's ideals of fairness emerge from meritocratic values – the intuitively appealing value system where economic rewards are distributed in proportion to hard work and aptitude, under a condition of 'equality of opportunity' that eliminates pre-existing privileges (Celarent, 2009).

The intuitive appeal of meritocratic values leaves the question of *where* they come from rarely asked. And they do come from somewhere: when children in Kenyan pastoralist and Namibian forager societies have been studied, their ideas of fairness don't appear to resemble meritocratic values. Rather, equal distributions appear to be preferred even when children's' productivity differs (Schäfer, Haun, & Tomasello, 2015).

It's been argued that meritocratic ideals currently serve to hide entrenched inequalities and declining social mobility (Littler, 2013) and, moreover, that the inequality produced by a true meritocracy will always erode equality of opportunity and sabotage social mobility (Hayes, 2013). It's also been argued that meritocratic values are highly questionable in of themselves (Rawls, 2009), and I argue that this will become increasingly so in the future.

First, this is because human-enhancements – cognitive, emotional and even moral (Shook, 2012) – are likely to become widespread but marketised, making fairness a primary concern (Farah, 2012), the possibility of biological classes a distinct possibility (van Steenbergen, 2002) and the ideals of meritocracy nonsensical. It is well known that childhood poverty can effectively become embedded in biology when malnutrition, exposure to pollution, or numerous other factors interfere with physical and mental development (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). Human enhancements may allow the economic privilege of the rich to become just as deeply embedded. Drugs that enhance cognitive performance are already proving controversial (Greely et al., 2008) and similar (more permanent) enhancements are expected soon (Farah, 2012). Under the neoliberal logic of self-management, where everything, even well-being, can be seen as means towards greater productivity (Gershon, 2011), it's not clear where the line between performance (e.g. cognitive) and non-performance (mood-based) enhancements lies. Herein I devote little attention to specific human enhancements, and state simply that those relevant to the current argument are any that offer an economic advantage. Two further issues – separate in cause but overlapping in effect – may compound the above issues of human enhancement. First, there is artificial intelligence and automation, the mass unemployment they may bring, and the subsequent intensification of social inequalities (Makridakis, 2017; Pew, 2014). Second are the declines in global economic activity that appear necessary to mitigate, or may be caused by, planetary ecological breakdown (Büchs & Koch, 2019). Needless to say, the implications of growing inequality within a shrinking economy are catastrophic.

A multiplicity of strategies will be needed to mitigate the socio-political implications of biotechnologies, AI, automation, and a shrinking economy (Harari, 2016; Kallis, 2011; Makridakis, 2017). Here, I proceed from the (hopefully banal) assumption that mitigating current and future inequalities will require a mix of top-down and bottom-up changes. I focus upon the latter by examining how current practices (and the notion of the 'self' these embed) may reproduce values that legitimise substantial inequalities, contrasting these with what may be called 'egalitarian practices'.

Clearly it's not the task of an individual author to prescribe specific egalitarian practices, but I suggest researchers could draw upon the following ideas (among many others):

1) They should take contemporary debates regarding free will seriously. Intuitive notions of free will can, and do, function to legitimise economic inequalities, and if this continues into an era of human enhancement it may prove highly problematic. However, the *Hard Incompatibilist* perspective on free will offers a valuable critique of any idea of 'fair inequality' (see Section 3).
2) They should unpick the concept of individualism, which has become rather loosely thrown around in public discourse and blamed for social fragmentation that supports inequality. Experience shows that individualistic and meritocratic values *are separable*. Further, when the latter are rejected, individualism can be a pillar of equality – despite Western tendencies towards the contrary (Section 4).

Inspiration for egalitarian practices can be found in a place surprising to some and obvious to others: the rich anthropology literature detailing practices of nomadic hunter-gatherers (Woodburn, 1982; see Section 3). I must emphasise that I'm *not* arguing

these societies offer specific models modern society should aspire to (although recent arguments have argued this is inevitable; Gowdy, 2020). But a key story drawn from this literature is invaluable: These politically egalitarian societies, through fear of the consequences for personal autonomy, reject precisely those values we now call 'meritocracy'; values that contemporary politicians, left and right, proclaim will eliminate entrenched inequalities along lines of class, gender and race. This, I suggest, should cause some pause for thought, even for those wary of egalitarianism.

2. Meritocracy and inequality

2.1. Meritocracy as an aspiration

The word meritocracy was coined by Michael Young in his 1958 dystopian satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033*. To give a brief summary, in Young's fictional world, merit was defined to be strictly equal to IQ plus effort, measured through administration of an increasingly refined and technocratic educational system. Throughout the story, the means of measuring merit in childhood becomes gradually more accurate such that testing in later in life eventually becomes superfluous. By 2020, the age at which a child's future merit is considered predictable has plummeted to three years old, so 'incompetent' children are encouraged to leave education early and intelligent children paid to stay. Companies sweep through the grammar schools, picking out the best brains for executive positions. A strongly stratified society eventually emerges in a new *justly unequal* world, where those at both the top and bottom know their place. The book doesn't end well (at least for those that dislike violent revolution).

The idea that economic outcomes and political power should be distributed based upon aptitude, hard work and achievement – rather than inherited through some social privilege – is an old one, and it didn't take long for Young's dystopia to be inverted into something aspirational (Celarent, 2009). Theresa May's 2016 speech epitomised this "*I want Britain to be the world's great meritocracy – a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow*", echoing the sentiments of President Obama's 2013 inaugural address[1] . The USA tends toward the extreme, with an infamous Cadillac Electric car advert slating the Europeans and their 'whole August off', and praising the American work ethic: '*It's pretty simple, you work hard, you create your own luck, and you've got to believe anything is possible*'[2] .

However, modern, Western conceptions of meritocracy are very different to that described by Young. Young's meritocracy was administered bureaucratically and based upon a fixed, non-malleable concept of individual merit (Allen, 2011). This isn't compatible with either the neoliberal idea of the state (Brown, 2009), nor the neoliberal vision of the self and one's individual responsibly over it (Read, 2009); a vision where people can, through willpower and personal motivation, 'create their own luck'. Modern conceptions of meritocracy thus rely upon the assumption that individual capacities are malleable (Allen, 2011) and that merit can be measured in different ways appropriate to different fields – academia as opposed to business as opposed to football – or simply by the wisdom of the market[3] . Meritocracy can thus be an ambiguous concept in practice, but the foundational idea remains coherent: effort and ability determine individuals' deservingness, and group identity shouldn't constrain one's opportunity to succeed economically, politically or otherwise.

There is an understandable, noble aim behind meritocratic ideals. After centuries (at least) of class, gender and racial oppression, meritocracy – and the equality of opportunity therein – promises to overcome these entrenched inequalities. This is one reason why such ideals can be found emerging from the left, with widely read writers legitimising meritocratic ideals of distribution, or at least grating them far more moral worth than inherited wealth[4] . Meritocracy, at its best, promises to eradicate the scientific racism and gendered-stereotypes underlying discrimination, ensuring everyone is treated equally, individually, with skills and capacities surpassing their identity.

2.2. (Against) meritocracy as a reality

The problem of course is that this hasn't happened. Hard work, intelligence and personality traits play a considerable role in determining economic outcomes (Cawley, Conneely, Heckman, & Vytlacil, 1997; Gensowski, 2018), but this is hardly the full story. Discrimination has only been reduced in limited contexts and regions (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Weichselbaumer & Winter-Ebmer, 2005). Many thus argue that meritocracy functions mostly in the realm of belief, thus hiding economic privilege and declines in social mobility, and legitimising associated inequalities (Littler, 2013). In 2001, Michael Young went so far as to suggest

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[1] See 'Britain, the great meritocracy: Prime Minister's speech', at www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britain-the-great-meritocracy-prime-ministers-speech, and Obama's inaugural speech transcript: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama.

[2] e.g., see www.slate.com/business/2014/03/ford-versus-cadillac-new-ad-featuring-detroit-dirt-mocks-poolside-commercial.html

[3] This is common in popular discourse, see *Banking, the ultimate meritocracy?* (www.ft.com/content/6eaee8b0-8b3d-11e8-bf9e-8771d5404543) or arguing against the idea *The Fable of Market Meritocracy* (www.forbes.com/2010/02/09/markets-finance-sarkozy-economics-opinions-columnists-shikha-dalmia.html#).

[4] For an example, see Guardian journalist George Monbiot who, when arguing against the right to privately own significant amounts of land and resources, writes '*Even if private wealth were obtained through the exercise of virtue (an unlikely proposition at the best of times) or through enterprise and hard work (ever less probable, in this new age of inheritance and rent)*'; www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/31/private-wealth-labour-common-space.

meritocracy has become worse than aristocracy due to the sense of entitlement those at the top feel: *"They can be insufferably smug, much more so than the people who knew they had achieved advancement not on their own merit but because they were, as somebody's son or daughter, the beneficiaries of nepotism. The newcomers can actually believe they have morality on their side"*[5] . This attitude is clear from the 'cult of smartness' described in Karen Ho's ethnography of Wall Street (Ho, 2009).

But we shouldn't assume that such values are produced and propagated downwards only by people at the top. Psychologists have found various processes by which people interpret events in biased, often self-serving ways. As Robert Frank describes in *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy* (Frank, 2016), these can support and reproduce meritocratic values. Frank offers the anecdote that we're far better at perceiving headwinds than tailwinds. This 'self-serving bias' leads people to create narratives of personal virtue around their successes, and external barriers around failures (Shepperd, Malone, & Sweeny, 2008). From an outside perspective, however, the bias may disappear: people may see both the failures and success of others as morally deserved – the 'just world belief' phenomenon (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). This has obvious implications for blaming of the poor (Furnham & Gunter, 1984). Other ways that meritocratic ideals can be legitimized include specific religious appeals (Teklu, 2018).

2.3. (Against) meritocracy as an ideal

The criticisms above are aimed at the reality of meritocracy. The deeper question is whether it can be considered just in theory, irrespective of how merit is defined.

Perhaps the most well-known criticism here comes from John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 2009). Feudal aristocracies, caste systems, and meritocracies, he argued, have a great deal in common: each distributes power and resources based upon factors that can be traced to accidents at birth and developments beyond individuals' control. You don't choose your genes, pre-natal environment, family, country of birth, or any of the countless other social, biological and environmental factors that combine to make you *who you are*. And *who you are*, in turn, shapes how you interact with the external world, the choices you make, thus reshaping who you are. Neither do you chose to be born in a time and place where your skills are (or aren't) valued. Rawls even claims that one's willingness and capacity to work hard arises from a complexity of arbitrary factors – a claim rarely well received. In short, everything can be traced back to luck. This undermines the meritocratic idea that, once social and economic barriers to success are removed, people deserve the rewards their efforts and talents bring.

Rawls has been proven right in more ways than he probably imagined. When major developmental impediments like abuse, malnutrition and disease are absent (Daniele & Ostuni, 2013), nature is as important as nurture in shaping various personality traits and intelligence measures[6] that predict success (Gensowski, 2018; Plomin & von Stumm, 2018). Numerous aspects of chance beyond socio-economic privileges significantly influence success as well (Frank, 2016)[7] . Further, psychology and neuroscience are showing that consciousness is typically a storyteller of decisions our brains have already made (Kahneman, 2011), rendering free will – in the way most experience it – an illusion (Bode et al., 2011; Greene & Cohen, 2004; Smith, 2011; Soon, Brass, Heinze, & Haynes, 2008).

Despite arguing against meritocratic desert, however, Rawls was not against inequality. Rather, he made a utilitarian argument for it: We should permit economic inequality only to the degree that it benefits the least well off, keeping in mind that those at the top don't morally deserve their wealth but are merely entitled to it as a lottery winner is entitled to their winnings. The challenge for such a prescription is whether the inequality permitted by such a theory can be maintained, or if socio-economic reality will always allow it to snowball into larger inequalities; a risk that could be intensified by both human enhancement and the mass employment that may be caused by AI and a shrinking economy.

3. The (age-old) question of free will

A recent talk by Yaron Brook at the Ayn Rand institute – *Inequality and the Denial of Free Will* – neatly demonstrates the relationship between notions of free will and inequality. Brook is careful to recognise the advantages of good genes, a loving family, a wealthy family, high-quality education, and being born both into a wealthy nation. Yet, he then argues that, the rich deserve their wealth irrespective of such advantages, because *"it's our free will that's actually shaping what we do… luck is there, but it's what you do with your luck, and how you create your own luck, because you make the right kind of choices"*[8] . Free will, then, is the tenuous thread from which Brook leaves the fairness of inequality hanging. Brook's argument is highly relevant for imagining how inequalities may be legitimised in the future, because *free will* may be the only thread left.

Yet, a notion of *free will* emerging from contemporary sciences doesn't support Brook's claim (Blackmore et al., 2013; Harris, 2012; Pereboom, 2006). Indeed, it offers a strong critique of 'fair inequality', closely mirroring that of Rawls. The chain of reasoning goes like this: (i) emerging understandings of free will may change how we think about blame and punishment, (ii) the flipside to these are praise and reward, and the way our understandings of blame/punishment are changing apply in equal measure to these, therefore, (iii) the idea of *fair inequality* is highly questionable. It's thus important to explore notions of free will, how these are acted out in social life,

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[5] See *Down with meritocracy* written by Michael Young in 2001; www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/jun/29/comment.

[6] To be clear, this claim offers *no* support for racial theories of intelligence. Where measured differences in intelligence between racial groups exist, these are readily explained by racism and historical discrimination, as researchers in the field have continually pointed out.

[7] To give an amusing example, economists with a surname initial near the beginning of the alphabet are significantly more likely to have a successful career than those *S, T* and *U*'s, simply because economists traditionally list authors on a paper alphabetically (Einav & Yariv, 2006)

[8] https://ari.aynrand.org/blog/2017/03/29/inequality-and-the-denial-of-free-will-video

and their role in legitimising inequality.

3.1. Hard incompatibilism and other perspectives

Three principle philosophical perspectives on free will can be understood in relation to two axes: whether one considers free will to be compatible with determinism (*compatibilism*) or not (*incompatibilism*), and whether one contends that free will exists or does not (Kane, 2002)[9]. *Compatibilists* contend that free will exists – even if the universe is deterministic – it's merely the ability to act according to one's motivations and values in the absence of external constraints[10]. In contrast, *Incompatibilists* see determinism and free will as incompatible, however, opinions then diverge: *Libertarian Incompatibilists* believe humans aren't bound by deterministic laws and can act in ways that are *undetermined yet controlled*, granting us free will; *Hard Incompatibilists* believe humans *are* bound by physical laws that preclude free will.

Libertarian Incompatibilists and *Hard Incompatibilists* thus agree that determinism precludes free will, but disagree about what laws govern human behaviour. *Compatibilists* and *Hard Incompatibilists* agree that it's not possible for someone to *intentionally* make a different decision in a given environment, under given information, given their social and biological history, and the agency we experience is an illusion (Bode et al., 2011; Soon et al., 2008). But they disagree upon whether the illusion is useful and whether moral responsibility can survive (discussed further below). The Hard Incompatibilists' answer to both questions is *no* (Blackmore et al., 2013; Harris, 2012; Pereboom, 2006).

The condition '*intentionally* do otherwise' is important to elaborate. Compatibilism and incompatibilism are typically discussed in relation to determinism, but determinism is outdated in physical sciences given the probabilistic nature of quantum processes. Hard Compatibilists, however, aren't strict determinists – rather, they believe that random/probabilistic process are as invalid a basis for free will as deterministic ones (Kane, 2002). Note also that contemporary free will scepticism is not fundamentally related to developments in neuroscience, despite frequent appeals to the field (Goodenough & Tucker, 2010; Roskies, 2006). The bases of Hard Incompatibilism come from the physical sciences; what neuroscience may answer is whether the mind can be understood to be functionally deterministic at a high-level (as a bicycle's mechanics can be understood to be functionally Newtonian), but this is a question largely separate from free will debates (*ibid*).

It should be apparent that my personal perspective, applied within this paper, is hard compatibilism. It's useful to clarify briefly what this does *not* imply:

11 It doesn't imply humans are individualists whose behaviour is genetically determined and unreceptive to social conditioning. Indeed, one could argue free will doesn't exist by claiming behaviour is infinitely malleable but entirely socialised[11].

12 It doesn't imply that human behaviour is fully predictable. This may remain forever impossible, as might, say, predicting snowfall in Seattle on Christmas day a decade ahead[12].

13 Importantly, it doesn't imply that we don't generate options and deliberate over them when we make choices. Nor does it imply that our decision-making capacities cannot be improved.

14 Crucially, it's no argument for fatalism – that there's no right and wrong, our actions are meaningless, so we may as well give up engaging with reality (itself a choice, normally a poor one)[13].

Hard incompatibilism rejects free will despite all this. Unsolved questions regarding consciousness aren't considered reason to think otherwise (Harris, 2012; Sapolsky, 2017), just as unsolved aspects of evolutionary theory aren't reasons to accept creationism. Similarly, the unpredictability of human choices isn't reason to believe they operate freely (Nichols, 2011), just as the unpredictability of Christmas weather in 2030 Seattle isn't reason to believe snow will *freely* choose whether or not to fall.

3.2. From free will to moral responsibility to (in)equality

All that said, I'm not concerned here about whether free will exists. The question is whether a notion can exist that is both

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[9] This is a brief and crude summary: further discussion and a description of other positions can be found in Kane's book

[10] Indeed, compatibilists like Dennett (1984) argue that mystical notions of free will – where humans actions are decoupled from natural laws – have been a needless distraction in free will debates

[11] The Stanford Prison Experiment springs to mind, where researchers witnessed psychologically ordinary students descend into sadism within days of being assigned as guards in a mock prison (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). Note also, that questions of free will are distinct from structure vs. agency debates: they're about unpacking what agency is

[12] This is no longer a purely meteorological question and depends upon human activities, which tend to become increasingly complex as the methods of prediction improve

[13] Greene & Cohen (2004; Greene & Cohen (2004; p1784) make this point neatly: *"Finally, there is the worry that to reject free will is to render all of life pointless: why would you bother with anything if it has all long since been determined? The answer is that you will bother because you are a human, and that is what humans do. Even if you decide, as part of a little intellectual exercise, that you are going to sit around and do nothing because you have concluded that you have no free will, you are eventually going to get up and make yourself a sandwich. And if you do not, you have got bigger problems than philosophy can fix"*

consistent with known physical laws *and* sufficient to ground moral responsibility. It should be emphasised that there are various notions of responsibility – for example, one may adopt a role entailing a *role responsibility* to fulfil certain duties or obligations[14] – and there are also various notions of moral responsibility, not all of which require free will[15] . (Much more could be said on both these points if space permitted.)

The notion I assume here is moral responsibility in the sense of *accountability*; that is, a kind that allows one to be praised or blamed for an action *without* appealing to consequentialism. Such accountability is widely and intuitively (but not universally) understood to require an account of free will where one could have *intentionally* acted differently (Farah, 2012). And hence it follows that a Hard Incompatibilist position on free will leads to a position of moral skepticism: How can people be held morally accountable for actions if our choices are made with a brain that developed through a chain of events we cannot claim to have controlled? Even when we're lucky enough to be able to act upon our will without coercion, we still don't choose what our will wills us to do (Strawson, 1994). This doesn't mean actions can't be attributed to a person – and if these actions are consistent with both their will and their values, a moral judgement of their character may be permitted[16] . Nonetheless, for a Hard Incompatibilist, ones' actions can't be praised or blamed; they may only be celebrated or condemned.

Many Hard Incompatibilists have thus argued moral responsibility must be rethought in light of contemporary knowledge of human behaviour (Harris, 2012; Pereboom, 2006; Sapolsky, 2017). When criminals are detained, it should be for precisely the reason we quarantine carriers of dangerous diseases (Pereboom, 2009). Punishment may *only* be justified if it deters future harm to others, but not because someone is said to 'deserve' punishment in proportion to harms they've caused (Greene & Cohen, 2004) – *retribution* and *blame* are illegitimate (Blackmore et al., 2013).

The parallels for inequality are now clear: If punishment is only justified when it's proven to keep society safer, inequality can only be justified when it's proven to make society richer. An argument frequently made is that believing in free will is necessary to deter immoral and criminal behaviour and create a healthy society (Baumeister, Crescioni, & Alquist, 2011), but this is debatable[17] . Most importantly, there's a vicious feedback: Consistently applied, any notion of free will that legitimises punishing people for harmful actions will also legitimise praise and deserving and the significant economic inequalities that may follow. And inequality – through instability, social fragmentation and destruction of trust – leads to increases in violence and criminality (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011); precisely the sorts of behaviours that belief in free will is supposed to disincentivise.

These arguments aren't just theoretical. Weaker 'free will' beliefs are correlated with *less* public support for retributive punishment, but *equal* support for consequentialist-based punishment (Shariff et al., 2014). And when people are asked to think abstractly about a deterministic universe, most no longer think moral responsibility makes sense (Nichols, 2011). Crucially, other studies have found that stronger beliefs in free will and free choice correlates with *greater tolerance of economic inequalities* (Mercier et al., 2018; Savani & Rattan, 2012; Savani, Stephens, & Markus, 2011). Finally, recent studies found no differences in (im)moral behaviour between people who do and don't believe in free will (Crone & Levy, 2018).

The reader may contest the Hard Compatibilist position I've adopted; argue it's pointless to discuss the concept of praise without reference specific acts; or disagree on the significance of the *vicious feedback* I've suggested. Irrespective, public notions of free will clearly play an important role in structuring the opposing notions of blame and praise and, therefore, the degree to which inequality is accepted, tolerated or contested.

It's thus insightful to now turn to egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies, who are some of the most politically equal and autonomous societies known to anthropologists. Such societies devote significant collective efforts – persistently and in elaborate ways – toward fighting precisely that concept of individual praise, in order to preserve equality and individual freedom. And its egalitarian practices, not theories, which play the crucial role.

4. Practicing equality

4.1. Egalitarian societies

In anthropological terms, egalitarian societies are those where inequalities in wealth, power and prestige are minimal (Boehm et al., 1993; Woodburn, 1982). Whatever unspoken differentials in status exist don't lead to people being either politically or economically dominated by anyone else. Some anthropologists thus prefer to describe such societies as *autonomous* rather than *equal* (Leacock, 1992). Note that writers often emphasise that this equality isn't always extended to women. In contrast, others argue this is unnecessarily cautious and that women's status is often mistakenly assumed to be less than men's (*ibid*), which is consistent with recent arguments made in very different ways (Dyble et al., 2015; Finnegan, 2013). This is an important point, but it's not explored further herein.

Egalitarian societies aren't restricted to a particular scale of organisation, type of economy, or area of the world (Boehm, 2009)[18] .

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[14] See the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and citations therein, for a thorough overview of moral responsibility (www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-responsibility)

[15] Again see the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/freewill)

[16] Formally, this is Moral Responsibility understood as *attributability* (www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-responsibility)

[17] For one, such beliefs may incentivise self-deception, a defining feature of human and non-human life (Trivers, 2011). The dark side to free will beliefs has led to optimism at the prospect of abandoning it (Caruso, 2016)

[18] Palaeolithic foragers may even have alternated seasonally between vastly different organisational forms (Wengrow & Graeber, 2015)

But many nomadic foragers are highly egalitarian, especially where returns on labour are immediate (Woodburn, 1982), while sedentary foraging groups are often far from politically equal (Sassaman, 2004). Herein I thus focus largely upon egalitarian practices of nomadic foragers (particularly African foragers). A crucial point is that even in nomadic foraging societies equality doesn't emerge passively from environmental constraints or an 'innocent' human nature[19] . Instead, it's vigorously and persistently asserted through cultural practices (Sassaman, 2004, Woodburn, 1982); practices with a social logic that can, irrespective of ecological conditions, prevent a transition to agriculture (Flannery & Marcus, 2012).

Clearly such societies have little in common with our own, and shouldn't be romanticised or adopted as rigid blueprints. Egalitarianism and the broader practices of such societies have undergone much critical appraisal (Townsend, 2018)[20] . Nevertheless, the literature described below – which, for transparency, is a selective sample chosen to scrutinise concepts of meritocracy and agency, analysed by a researcher (myself) without a formal anthropological background – offers an interesting perspective from which to examine values of the contemporary West, particularly by considering how productivity and success of hunter-gatherers in egalitarian societies is framed and understood. To this end, a sensible place to start is the provision of food.

4.2. Humble hunters and ridiculed gods

As James Woodburn described in his seminal article, some of the most important egalitarian practices arise when food is brought into a camp, particularly large animals (Woodburn, 1982). Why is obvious: As groups of diverse human beings living in an unpredictable reality, hunters' success varies significantly with individuals' skill, luck, persistence, capacity to work, and numerous other things (*ibid, p440*). Some hunters inevitably bring in a disproportionate share of food (Lee, 1979) and preventing this from evolving into status and prestige and onto political power is the key challenge for egalitarian groups. Humbleness on the part of successful hunters is thus the general rule, particularly when they're directly involved in distributing meat (Wiessner, 1996). But successful hunters are often systematically detached from their success by placing the distribution of meat under someone else's duty. In strictly egalitarian societies across three continents, the owner of the hunting *implement* is considered the owner of the kill and hence tasked with distribution, rather than the hunter themselves (*ibid,* p177). By constantly passing hunting implements between people, this serves to randomise how the yield of different hunters is perceived; exceptional hunters are frequently using others' tools.

Arrogance is normally met with ridicule or worse (Boehm et al., 1993). Lewis (2008) describes how one particularly successful hunter of the Mbendjele remained so stubbornly boastful that women collectively forced him into exile. Lee (1979) tells of how, in his early fieldwork days, he wished to treat the Ju'/hoansi he'd been studying to a feast, so brought them the largest Ox he could find at a local market. Upon excitedly presenting his gift he was met with ridicule, which continued for days after the feast and included a 60 yr old grandmother calling it a 'bag of bones'.

Even the Ju'/hoansi's Gods don't escape ridicule. The Ju'/hoansi are some of the only foragers with something resembling a monotheistic religion (Gray, 2009): *Gao Na* is believed to have created the Earth, water, animals, plants, people, etc. But the thanks he receives for this is endless ridicule through stories where he's deceived and seduced by the Ju'/hoansi women and tricked into jumping into a pit of their faeces. This is a graphic example of a common theme: Success and productivity are systematically detached from personal value, even if you happen to have created the Earth.

4.3. 'Demanding' gifts

Distribution is worth exploring further. In nomadic foraging groups, anthropologists emphasise how sharing is often done via demand, rather than reciprocity or generosity; via taking not giving (Peterson, 1993)[21] . With sharing as the norm, 'giving' – in the form of gifts, or a skilled hunter sharing their high yields – is neither praised nor thanked, but expected (Wiessner, 1996)[22] . Particularly successful and productive hunters are more likely to be ridiculed than praised.

Methods of distribution beyond the realm of food are also important, and the Hadza of Tanzania offer a particularly interesting example. Woodburn (1982) learnt of a popular Hadza game that involves throwing a handful of bark against a tree, noting which way up the pieces fall, then awarding the staked items to the winner (p442). Winning relies upon blind-luck, and it's forbidden to gamble personal property considered essential for one to feed and protect themselves. A theory of distributional justice is thus implicit: Everyone has a right to the tools and resources needed to meet their basic needs and maintain individual autonomy; beyond that, distribution should be essentially random. Again, the important point is not the theory but the practice, which is acted out daily – Woodburn notes that the Hadza spent more time playing the game than they did hunting and gathering.

Notably, distribution in the game is explicitly connected to luck. This represents a thin thread linking to Rawls' theory of justice, namely, that everything can be traced back to chance. Moreover, the typical egalitarian forager mythology is of the same spirit:

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[19] Ecological determinism and the nature-culture duality more broadly have been criticised (Viveiros de Castro, 1996, 1998)

[20] E.g. it's been suggested that many acephalous (leaderless) societies have been mislabelled as egalitarian (Townsend, 2018), oft-romanticised animism should be taken much less seriously (Willerslev, 2013), and empathy can be malicious (Bubandt & Willerslev, 2015)

[21] This presents a puzzle by incentivising freeriding, but recent work suggests the high mobility found in forager groups offers a solution (Lewis, Vinicius, Strods, Mace, & Migliano, 2014).

[22] Indeed, the concept of thanking someone for sharing food is unthinkable for many foraging groups, perhaps due to fear this would create obligatory debts (Wiessner, 1996; p180).

> *For devout Jews, Christians, and Muslims, the cosmos is imbued with serious moral purpose to which humans must bend in ways that run counter to the spirit of play. For hunter-gatherers, in contrast, the cosmos is capricious. The hunter-gatherer deities themselves are playful and even comical beings, not stern judges. They are not all-powerful, all-wise, all-good, or all-bad. Like people, they are sometimes good, sometimes bad, occasionally wise, often foolish, and generally unpredictable.* (Gray, 2009; p497)

This is not to say that this inherently amoral vision is unmitigated: Woodburn recounts how a Hadza gambler successful in accumulating a stock of possessions, through a string of good luck, would often attempt to retain their winnings by leaving the game or moving camps. But others would simply follow and pressure them to keep playing until their luck ran out.

4.4. Tying success to the moral sphere

Other egalitarian practices not only systematically detach success and productivity from personal deserving, but simultaneously frame individuals' abilities as contingent upon moral behaviour elsewhere.

Jerome Lewis describes the complex cultural practices of *ekila*[23] – beliefs common among tens of thousands of foragers spread throughout central Africa, including the *Mbendjele* (Lewis, 2008). *Mbendjele* society is highly gendered, with most hunting done by men, and equality between genders maintained by dissolving tensions through dance, song, ridicule, and various practices that attribute the productivity of one gender to the activities of the other, emphasising interdependence. Collectively, one way this manifests is via woman's rituals – the secrets of which are only known to women – which are said to '*tie up*' the spirits of game animals in order for men to be able to find them (*ibid*, p310). Individually, hunting success is not seen as the result of individuals' skill, but as something made possible by hunters' maintaining their *ekila*. And maintaining one's *ekila* requires appropriate moral conduct – appropriately sharing what one produces; not inappropriately sharing one's sexuality outside of marriage, etc. As Lewis found, *if ever I asked why a particular person was a good hunter, men would dogmatically insist that it was because he does not ruin his ekila by 'wasting it on other women'. It is a question not of hunting skill but of sexual discipline* (*ibid*, p311). Success, then, is seen as contingent upon moral conduct and collective woman's power – this couldn't be further from the meritocratic idea of success as an outcome of individuals' aptitude and hard work.

4.5. Individualism and equality

One may hastily infer from this discussion that these are deeply collective societies. However, a distinctive characteristic of egalitarian foragers is how strikingly individualistic they can be, precisely in order to mitigate inequality. Thus, the crucial point is the comfortable co-existence of these seemingly conflicting ideals of individualism and fiercely anti-meritocratic values.

The relationship between individualism and equality is complex and contested (Béteille et al., 1986). Louis Dumont, while exploring the origins of modern civilisation, highlighted the peculiarity of Western individualism (Dumont, 1992; Macfarlane, 1992), contrasting this with Eastern Holism (Dumont, 1980; Madan, 2001). Individualism, in this sense, is the tendency to view individuals as discrete, non-social moral beings that can be understood in isolation – a 'methodological individualism' (Macfarlane, 1992) – while holism asserts that individuals can only be understood in relation to the whole. Hunter-gatherers, with their deep understanding of interdependence, don't appear to express this kind of individualism (Tomasello, Melis, Tennie, Wyman, & Herrmann, 2012). At the same time, however, one finds a determined striving for individual independence and self-reliance, from which flows a kind of social fragmentation. The following practices outlined by Woodburn (1982) demonstrate this vividly:

4.5.1. Mobility

Across the six societies Woodburn examines, the numerous camps of 10–30 people that exist are in flux. Individuals change camps frequently and camps themselves have flexible, overlapping territories. This mobility can't be explained by ecological factors – but culturally, it's considered healthy and desirable. This acts as a powerful egalitarian mechanism, allowing anyone to leave at a moment's notice to avoid other individuals' attempts to dominate. *Divide that ye be not ruled* (p209) is how Scott (2010) summarises the tendency of nomadic groups in the mountains of South East Asia to fragment, avoiding capture by the State. What Woodburn describes could be understood as this principle being acted out at the community-scale, thus countering domination emerging from within the group. These are social relations far from the small, close-kit collectives that occupy the imaginations of contemporary intentional communities.

4.5.2. Dependence

Woodburn and others since (Lewis, 2008) emphasise that equality demands that dependence upon *specific* others is avoided. Consequently, while interdependence is understood to be inevitable, individual self-sufficiency is strongly encouraged – no one is dependent on any*one* else for access to food and resources required to support themselves (even children learn to hunt as soon as they have sufficient strength). The Hadza offer an extreme example: Woodburn reports that people eat much of what they gather on the spot, and only food surpluses tend to be shared; that individuals (normally men) often live alone as hermits for long periods; that little fuss is made about formal mealtimes and people often eat alone throughout the day (as do the Ju'/hoansi; Lee, 1979). Again, we're

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[23] *Ekila* embodies a multiplicity of rules and understandings connected to food and sharing; sexuality, mensuration and reproduction; relations between humans, between genders, and between humans and animals. Importantly, *ekila* is learnt implicitly – through practices not discourse; never taught via specialists – and it presents guidelines not rules.

looking at societies with little resemblance to contemporary visions of rebuilding communities.

4.5.3. Openness and altruism

The following should subdue any remaining doubt that I'm romanticising these societies. Woodburn (1982) concludes that Hadza society, above all, is open: there's unrestricted access to knowledge, resources, tools, and weapons (to mitigate natural variations in people's strength). But the question of altruism is more difficult. Woodburn witnessed (very rare) occasions when Hadza groups would abandon someone old or sick when moving camps, knowing they'd have little chance of surviving – something he doubts would've happened in neighbouring agricultural groups. On the other hand, Hadza societies' openness is universal, even allowing those with leprosy to fully participate in society, despite the consequences and contagiousness of the disease being well known. In contrast, neighbouring agriculturists confine lepers to the margins of society. However, Woodburn claims this shouldn't be mistaken for empathy, given the lepers among the Hadza are constantly teased about their clumsiness (*ibid*, p448).

5. Discussion and conclusions

The discussion above has covered the ideal of meritocracy, the way it serves to legitimise substantial inequalities, how the values underpinning it are ultimately related to broader notions of praise, blame and free will, and how many cultural practices of egalitarian societies studied by anthropologists work to oppose precisely those values we now call meritocracy. Finally, perhaps counter-intuitively, strongly individualistic cultural tendencies appear perfectly compatible with equally strong anti-meritocratic ones.

All this has important implications for current inequalities and how they're understood. The issues will become increasingly important in the future if identity-based discrimination is eliminated – as the meritocratic dream promises – while the availability of human enhancement increases for those that can pay. Poverty currently impacts those at the bottom in very real biological ways, and human enhancement would add this dynamic to the top; inequality drawn along lines of biological ability could thus become endemic (Harari, 2016; van Steenbergen, 2002). This won't happen abruptly, but subtly and incrementally. What moral basis for meritocracy is left in a world where cognition, memory, attention, motivational capacities, and many other things can be upgraded for a price?

One may expect that the capability to biologically enhance people would lead us to seriously question the legitimacy of economic inequalities resulting from existing biological differences even absent enhancement. But given humans' capacity for dissonance and self-deception (Trivers, 2011) – capacities being actively encouraged in various ways – the opposite may happen.

Theories emerging from evolutionary psychology argue that positive illusions – overconfidence or exaggerating one's sense of control over the future – are adaptive advantages and useful motivational tools (Johnson & Fowler, 2011; van Veelen & Nowak, 2011). This has inspired behavioural prescriptions: Responding to a reader's letter to the *New York Times* challenging Obama's suggestion that social and political factors contribute to entrepreneurial success, columnist David Brooks replies, "*You should start your life with the illusion that you are completely in control of what you do. You should finish life with the recognition that, all in all, you got better than you deserved*"[24] . Similarly, in the case of free will beliefs, Blackmore et al. (2013) describes how advocating an illusional mind-set is common even among neuroscientists and philosophers[25] . This is motivated by the assumption that without such illusions, immoral behaviour would become endemic and society would suffer. Yet, moral desert, praise and the meritocratic values that legitimise substantial inequalities appear to be the unavoidable flipside to the coin. Empirical data exploring people's belief systems support this claim, and the egalitarian societies studied by anthropologists are replete with cultural practices rejecting precisely these meritocratic values. And inequality, in turn, can be a driver of precisely those behaviours – mistrust, violence and other criminality – that this illusion of free will is intended to mitigate.

But fighting the desire to blame others for harmful acts is hugely difficult – increasingly so the more offensive the act and the more freedom of choice the person appears to have. Accepting that a public relations executive who knowingly spreads misinformation about the dangers of smoking, while receiving a vast income from a major tobacco company, is merely a product of history and circumstance is incredibly difficult. Yet, on some level, blaming such a person helps reproduce a culture that considers significant economic inequalities to be 'fair'. It's ironic that financial elites have increasingly been labelled as *criminals* since the 2007–08 recession, precisely while a neuroscience-based criminal justice defence of '*their brain made them do it*' has risen rapidly (Greely & Farahany, 2019).

The combination of increasing capabilities for human enhancements and the embracing of positive illusions and free will beliefs, could bring mass inequalities along with a value system tailored to legitimise them. This, precisely when ecological (Büchs & Koch, 2019) and technological (Makridakis, 2017) trends threaten to bring mass unemployment, posing an imminent catastrophe if combined with mass inequalities. Suppose highly effective smart drugs are developed that drastically enhance memory, attention and motivation – increasingly effective the more expensive a drug one can afford. Will a widespread belief in free will allow people to stubbornly justify the economic rewards these increased cognitive capacities bring by saying '*but I chose to take the drug!*'? Similar rationalising could accompany fully embodied enhancements. Gene mutations that allow people to function normally with only a few hours of sleep have recently been discovered (Hirano et al., 2018), paving the way for engineering the trait in others. One can imagine a future Yaron Brook saying, '*yes, some people have biological enhancements that others don't, but they still chose to get out of bed at 4am and work till 9 pm, applying their upgraded-minds, so they deserve whatever economic rewards the market gives them*'.

While self-serving cognitive biases are widely perceived to be advantageous, it's unlikely any effort will be devoted to biologically

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[24] See '*The Credit Illusion*', 2012 (www.nytimes.com/2012/08/03/opinion/brooks-the-credit-illusion.html).
[25] Indeed, one philosophical position is called *Illusionism* (Smilansky, 2002).

reducing them (which would probably be impossible anyway). Further, while companies like *Google* direct substantial financial resources to things like immortality research, it's unlikely the development of human enhancement technologies will stall (unless ecological catastrophes become apocalyptic). And it would be objectionable to rely upon top-down enforcement of equality in a way at all resembling the dystopian vision of Kurt Vonnegut in *Harrison Bergeron*, where, the state's *Handicapper General* is tasked with bringing everyone down to the same level – physically, cognitively, and aesthetically.

For another way forward, one may look to Scandinavia. Here one finds that combination of highly individualistic and strongly anti-meritocratic values – mirroring those characteristics of the egalitarian societies reviewed in Section 3. The individualism found within Scandinavian cultures has become infamous[26] ; indeed, according to Eurostat household statistics, over half the Swedish population live alone (with Denmark and Finland close behind). But Scandinavian is more well-known for its egalitarianism, both in practice and theory – 'ideal' pay ratios for CEOs to skilled workers found in Sweden, Norway and Denmark are among the lowest reported at around 2:1 to 3:1 (Kiatpongsan & Norton, 2014)[27] . Social practices and norms appear crucial here. Famously, there are the ten principles of *Janteloven*, which include *You're not to imagine yourself better than we are*, *You're not to think you are more important than we are*, and even *You're not to think you are good at anything*[28] . These informal rules bring amusing outcomes, such as when male pick-up artists find their practiced strategies of preying on female insecurity and socially dominating other men become an embarrassing handicap[29] . But *Janteloven* also bolsters concrete outcomes, like strong support for universal healthcare and welfare, and unusual phenomenon such as CEOs spending significant amounts of time socialising with regular workers[30] .

In a future of human enhancement, salvaging something resembling equality of opportunity may require national health care providers to make available basic enhancements to all citizens, in the same way vaccinations are now offered; one can imagine the Scandinavians being some of the first to do this. Similarly, if AI and automation, combined with economic slowdown dictated by ecological limits, requires inequalities to be severely curtailed to avoid widespread deprivation for those at the bottom, Scandinavians may be best placed to act accordingly. In the future, then, I can only hope such values permeate other countries, such that only minimal income differences are considered *fair*, hopefully paving the way for enforcing strict maximum wage differentials (in-line with *fair* preferences) to become something other than political suicide.

This, however, brings us back to a point touched on before. The arguments I've made throughout underpin a particularly strong egalitarianism and I've spoken little of potential trade-offs: To what degree can economic inequality increase overall efficiency and wealth and hence be legitimised on utilitarian grounds? This is an important question, but one beyond the scope of this paper. My point is, instead, to highlight the deep irony in the way meritocratic ideals are proposed as a remedy to unfair inequalities – those based upon various forms of discrimination – while the same values appear to be seen as the origin of inequality and oppression in actually existing egalitarian societies around the world. If, as Harari (2016) argues, future bioengineering will allow humans to become like Gods – at least, those that can afford to – we'd be wise to remember that in those societies where equality is consistently and fiercely practiced, even the Gods themselves receive anything but praise.

Acknowledgments

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26 See Lars Tragardh's Guardian article, Feb 2012: *The Swedish model is the opposite of the big society, David Cameron*

27 Finland slightly less so, with data suggesting a ratio of 5:1

28 These retain cultural relevance, but this is, arguably, diminishing (for example, see: www.scandinaviastandard.com/what-is-janteloven/)

29 Indeed, 'Roosh V' complained specifically about the effects of the welfare state and Jante law; see Katie Baker's award winning article '*Cockblocked by Redistribution: A Pick-up Artist in Denmark*' (www.dissentmagazine.org/article/cockblocked-by-redistribution)

30 See *Forget hygge: The laws that really rule in Scandinavia* (August 2018; www.bbc.co.uk/ideas)

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