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Chapter 1

What is Meritocracy?

*To those of you who received honors, awards,
and distinctions, I say, well done. And to the C students,
I say you too can be president of the United States.¹*

George W. Bush

In this statement at Yale's commencement address, the President, who graduated from Yale, was making a mockery of the idea that merit leads to success. When we typically think of merit, we often associate talent with the particular trait of intelligence and academic prowess. George W. Bush was effectively disassociating political power from the narrow skills associated with book learning. The American republic, it seems, is not the Republic of Plato, which is led by philosopher-kings, nor is it living up to the ideals of Jefferson's "natural aristocracy."

We can all recall that student who was referred to as the "teacher's pet"; some of the readers might even have been that student. But for the most part the other students are likely to recall feelings of animosity, hostility, envy, and sometimes wonder at the student who seemed to so easily grasp new concepts and so easily recalled everything that we were told to read the night before. We especially recall being told that that person was the kind of person that was going to be successful. Through brainpower and hard work, that person was destined to have a higher status than all of us for the rest of our lives. Did it actually work out that way?

George W. Bush's success is based on an entirely different set of characteristics than those of pure merit. His grandfather was a wealthy financier, US Senator from Connecticut, and Yale graduate. His father was a US Congressman, CIA director, Vice President, and later President of the United States. His father also graduated from Yale and would come to marry Barbara Pierce Bush. She was the granddaughter of an Ohio Supreme Court Justice and a descendent of Franklin Pierce, the 14th president of the United States (McNamee & Miller 2004, 84). George W. Bush's power seems to emanate from a political dynasty that is based on hereditary privilege.

This type of hereditary privilege, while entirely contradictory to the principles of meritocracy, is in fact a fairly common occurrence in America and one that is based on a different set of values. Richard J. Daley, the longtime machine boss and mayor of Chicago, was once accused of providing special privileges to his children. His son was awarded a lucrative city contract for insurance services

and local reporters viewed this as evidence of corruption and patronage. The mayor, far from denying the charges, stated, "It's a father's duty to help his sons" (Clark 2000, 18). Helping one's child is not a crime; it is a responsibility. And what is more, helping one's offspring is not immoral, it is what makes one an honorable man. In many cities the Mayor's statement would have caused public outrage, but in Chicago the public nodded their heads in approval of their honorable mayor and patriarch.² Eventually, they would elect his son, Richard M. Daley, to be mayor and, as Chicagoans often joke, the children of the city would come to believe that the Daley clan had the unusual habit of naming their boys "Mayor." It was simply a fact of life and not one that was cause for concern. Things were exactly as they should be.

This state of affairs would no doubt horrify the founders of the American Republic. Their vision of an ideal nation seems not to have filtered down to the masses. The founders struggled in a revolutionary battle to usurp monarchy and the hereditary transmission of political power. When Thomas Paine vehemently argued for independence in *Common Sense* he said,

To the evil of monarchy we have added that of hereditary succession.... For all men being originally equals, no *one* by *birth* could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others for ever, and though himself might deserve *some* decent degree of honors of his contemporaries, yet his descendants might be far too unworthy to inherit them (Paine 1976, 76).

He is claiming that we should properly reward those who we deem meritorious but that this merit cannot be transmitted. Specifically, he goes on to say, "When we are planning for posterity, we ought to remember that virtue is not hereditary" (Paine 1976, 110). If we do not wish to put that statement on par with other "self-evident" truths, we could certainly put it into the category of blatantly obvious to anyone with common sense.

Still, we have a peculiar penchant to accept as legitimate a status claim that is based on aristocratic and feudal notions of desert. As a value we may call it "non-ideological particularism" (Clark 1975, 321). Rather than seeking to apply general rules to particular situations, or what social scientists call "universalism" (Parsons 1937), we evaluate people according to their individual ascriptive traits. Instead of "looking for the best person for the job," which applies a general rule for selection, we may believe that "a person deserves special consideration because he is the son of so and so." Besides our conceptions of desert based on merit, we also draw upon other values irrespective of merit to decide who gets what and who gets treated how.

Privilege based on hereditary claims is a long-standing element of English culture, and though we ostensibly rejected many of those claims, Americans are nevertheless the cultural inheritors of that and other Western values that emanate from our English cultural origins. Students of British history will readily acknowledge that England had "strong class-based cultures, visible from cloth-

ing, audible from accent and embodied in mannerisms” (Ambercrombie & Ward, et. al. 2000, 147). While American society did undergo a great transformation during the battle for independence, we still retained many of our cultural traditions. The difference for Americans is that we were forced to justify our exalting of some over others on different grounds than in the past.

Origins of the Term

The term “meritocracy” was introduced in a social satire written in the 1950s where social goods and positions are distributed solely on the basis of merit. In *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Michael Young emphasizes two major theoretical conflicts. The first is distributive and focuses on selection by family and selection by merit (Young 1994, 20). According to the theory, inherited position and nepotism are antithetical to distribution by merit. The second conflict is political. Democracy is rule by the people, while meritocracy is rule by the cleverest people (Young 1994, 11). Writing retrospectively as a narrator in the future, he finds himself in a situation where democracy no longer seems appropriate. Democracy, he believes, worked when there wasn’t equality of opportunity because the clever members of the lower classes could organize and lead their group (Young 1994, 125). In this way the parliament of the past was full of talented people (Young 1994, 125). But once a meritocracy emerged and equal opportunity was achieved, there was nothing for the lower classes to complain about; they had every possible opportunity to rise above their station and the labor movement collapsed, in part because it lacked leaders.

A close reading of his satire reveals that a meritocracy is an “ideal type” society. Although one would be hard pressed to find any society that completely fits the meritocratic model, one can compare an existing society to the model and determine to what extent it is meritocratic. One can also list the core values behind the promotion of meritocracy and determine whether these values are held by contemporary Americans. The central question addressed in this book is, “Do Americans support meritocracy or do they value unmeritocratic distributive schemes?”

The Means and Ends of Meritocracy

At the core of all theories of justice there is a single question: Who is deserving of what? Meritocracy gives a particular answer to this question, but it is often misunderstood or defined only incompletely. There are generally accepted notions of merit having to do with skills and talents (Fullinwider and Lichtenberg 2004, 25). Presumably, the only just consideration in making a distributive decision should be whether the person has the necessary abilities or has a greater

abundance of those abilities than others. This question of desert is addressed by David Miller, who believes that, “Roughly speaking, when we say that a person deserves some benefit on the basis of a quality, we are anticipating a future performance in which that quality is displayed.... If a judgment of merit cannot be linked in this way to an anticipated performance, then we do not have desert in its proper meaning” (Miller 1999, 137). While this commonsense understanding of merit as “the ability to do the job” makes sense, it is limited because it does not consider a person’s opportunities for acquiring the skills to do the job.

An often-overlooked theme in Young’s book lies at the very foundation of the social theory. There is no meritocracy prior to the establishment of equal opportunity. This should act as a precondition to any discussion of meritocracy. As long as the family and class background have an influence on a person’s outcome, the distribution of social goods are not distributed entirely on merit. In its ideal, it is only after these factors are eliminated that the distribution of goods and positions can be based on merit. In short, the correlation between one’s social origins and one’s outcome in life is zero in a meritocracy. Unfortunately, many people’s conception of merit is independent of the opportunities available to others. For these individuals, a person can have merit even if society is actively discriminating against a class of persons on non-merit related grounds. Those people may not fully appreciate the ends of a meritocratic society.

If one of the ends of meritocracy is to provide everyone with an equal opportunity, then what exactly do we mean by “equal opportunity?” In an ideal meritocracy we have a society where every individual, regardless of circumstances of birth, can realistically compete with more advantaged members of society and upward social mobility occurs easily for those who are talented and make use of their talents. This is the basis for the meritocrat’s definition of equal opportunity. Based on the end that is sought, the minimum set of opportunities distributed to all in a meritocracy is very high indeed, but it is not infinite. The realistic competitiveness discussed here does not mean that the mentally disabled should be made to compete with the child prodigy. It only means that persons of the same innate capacity will not be hampered or assisted by their social origins and will, if they so choose, achieve the same results in society. The only limits on individual achievements in a meritocracy are natural ability, effort, and individual choices. This requires that the minimum level of resource allocations to the disadvantaged be quite great, but not limitless.

Young’s idealized meritocracy is a society that strives for other ends as well. It strives to improve efficiency and international competitiveness by maximizing human potential in the country (Young 1994, 4, 21, 85) and to increase upward and downward social mobility (Young 1994, 5, 43, 60). Although not a central part of the theory, improving efficiency and international competitiveness serves as a legitimizing claim for the more important elements. For some, “distributive justice can be realized only to the extent that each person has complete, and equal opportunity to develop fully his or her *potential* for productivi-

ty” (Haslett 1997, 138). This is because limiting an individual’s ability to fully develop their natural talents creates social and economic loss in the form of less able social and economic actors. If Bill Gates’ family had been too poor to buy him his first computer and there was no social safety net to provide him with one, then Gates and everyone in society loses out. Our production of human capital operates below maximum efficiency when some members of society are denied the opportunity to acquire skills and training. In effect, we would be producing sub-optimal human resources. The provision of resources works to improve the chances of upward mobility for smart, hard-working individuals.

These ends are accomplished through specific means that are carried out through public policy. Civil service exams eliminate nepotism and seniority and choose among applicants through tests that measure merit (Young 1994, 9, 69, 78). The theory, as formulated by Young, also proposes paying clever children allowances so that they will stay in school (Young 1994, 48) and that universities select among applicants through objective examinations that measure merit (Young 1994, 50). In this ideal society, the influence of the family is weakened and the role of the school is enhanced (Young 1994, 30) through Goffman-like total institutions that substitute kinship so that children don’t spend their spare time with their family, which may have a “lower culture” (Young 1994, 59). In theory, boarding schools become the mechanism by which lower class children are socialized into the upper class world they are moving to.

Research shows that wealthy individuals use boarding schools to provide their own children with the cultural capital necessary to succeed. This is done by weakening the family bond and preparing their children for a place among the elite (Cookson & Persell 1985). Meritocratic theory supposes that boarding schools can have a similar effect on disadvantaged youths and in the ideal are used along with the traditional day school. This particular idea, however, is not new to those interested in education. Lipset notes that the Workingmen’s Party of the 1820s advocated state financed boarding schools for the common child because class-based cultural advantages could not be eliminated without such extraordinary effort (Lipset 1996, 82). Indeed, the notion of remolding the young to fit society’s ends is an idea that has been thought about since the classical era.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the theory seeks the elimination of the inheritance of property because it rewards those who may lack merit with unearned wealth (Young 1994, 26). Nepotism, or the assistance of one’s own child over the children of others, may be a biological impulse (Bellow 2003, 22), but it is in direct conflict with the meritocratic ideal. Meritocracy is an individual-regarding distributive theory, not a group-regarding theory. Individuals who display superb ability and effort deserve rewards; it is not the groups they belong to that deserve the rewards. Hence it is not legitimate in a meritocracy to reward a person’s family, ethnic/racial group, city, or nation for the achievements of the individual. Although these groups may benefit from the achieve-

ments of a person in their group, they would not be the direct recipients of any reward due to the individual nor would they be entitled to the reward by proxy of the individual.

Characteristics that are inherited from the parent such as race, ethnicity, class, and social status cannot have a bearing on the child's success in a meritocracy. When rewarding a meritorious parent, the meritocracy cannot go so far as to destroy meritocracy for future generations. Wealth for the parent, though merited, is not allowed to destroy the very system it sought to establish. It is a system where people are judged and rewarded for having relevant personal characteristics that are independent of characteristics of the parent. The argument that "my ancestors earned it" is not a legitimate reason for a descendent to lay claim on wealth and other advantages. They must compete for rewards based on their own merit just as any other individual must. It is through all these various policies that the meritocratic ideal is turned into a reality. For some it is also the manner in which social justice is attained.

To summarize, a meritocratic society is one that promotes smart, hard-working individuals regardless of which social strata they happen to be born in. It is a society where one's race, gender, and social background does not influence their outcome and where every individual, regardless of circumstances of birth, can realistically compete with more advantaged members of society. It is a society where equality of opportunity is a reality and where the restraints on individual success (except for innate capability) are eliminated as far as is possible. The items that are necessary to provide individuals with an equal opportunity to succeed in society are not distributed by merit, but are provided to all on an equal basis. Inherited position and nepotism are eliminated in a meritocratic society.

Commonsense Ideas about Meritocracy

The most basic understanding of meritocratic distribution is that the distributed social good not be distributed by heredity or any other characteristic unrelated to performance. Those that are the most able to perform the task, or who have demonstrated the highest ability, should receive the reward. Here, people argue that the person with the best qualifications should get the reward and the qualifications are limited to the abilities that are necessary for the performance of designated tasks. A person's connections or family ties are not directly related to the ability to perform, therefore, the Economist writes, "The United States likes to think of itself as the very embodiment of meritocracy: a country where people are judged on their individual abilities rather than their family connections" ("Ever higher society"). One's performance, not family connections, is the basis for most people's understanding of merit as a distributive rule.

But merit may also be about having the “right stuff.” And the “right stuff” consists of “being talented, having the right attitude, working hard, and having a high moral character” (McNamee & Miller 2004, 21). This commonsense notion harkens back to Jefferson’s “virtue and talent” of the natural aristocracy, but at its heart it is still about upward mobility and deserving one’s outcome in life. According to McNamee and Miller,

America is seen as the land of opportunity where people get out of the system what they put into it. Ostensibly, the most talented hardest working, and most virtuous get ahead. The lazy, shiftless, and indolent fall behind. You may not be held responsible for where you start out in life, but you are responsible for where you end up. If you are truly meritorious, you will overcome any obstacle and succeed (McNamee & Miller 2004, 3).

Given that different notions of “virtue” have prompted philosophers to write volumes on the matter, it is unlikely (and very difficult) to determine just what the public might expect from a “virtuous” leader. Merit, while still complicated, is more straightforward. It’s about one’s performance. And one’s performance is measured by one’s ability and effort.

For the sake of clarity, we may wish to call this idea of merit “technical merit.” It is limited to a person’s demonstrated ability or expectations about future performance at given tasks. When selecting an employee by technical merit, the employer must choose the person, or among the persons, who have the ability, selecting the employee with the most ability, if there is such a candidate. Technical merit is not influenced by the initial set of opportunities available to different individuals. It is a measure of raw ability, regardless of others’ opportunity to acquire the ability. Therefore a person could claim to merit a reward because of his/her superior abilities, even if other individuals are actively denied any opportunity to develop their own talents and skills.

One need not stretch their imagination too far to conceive of a situation where members of one racial group are actively prohibited from educational opportunities and forced into the lower paid workforce because of inadequate skills. The favored racial group, with a monopoly on important educational resources, receives the training that allows its individual members to acquire the skills to perform tasks that command higher salaries. Because individuals in the favored group possess the necessary skills and talents, while individuals in the disfavored group do not, the individuals in the favored group claim to have more merit than individuals in the disfavored group. Questions of distributive justice are therefore a central element in most discussions of merit.

Outline of the Book

This book is about what the American public believes is just. Specifically, it is about the extent to which Americans support or reject the ideal of meritocracy. It begins in chapter 2 with an overview of the uses and limits of public opinion research. Often public opinion seems mercurial and irrational. This is because the public is largely uninformed about political issues and holds contradictory values. When one value is emphasized over another value, different responses can be elicited for the same question. This does not mean that public opinion is useless; it only means that public opinion is limited to understanding which values are made salient when specific questions or problems are raised. Understanding these values brings us closer to understanding American society.

These conflicting values, however, can be put into context by understanding the theoretical and philosophical debate over meritocracy. Some theorists believe that meritocracy is unjust because they value non-arbitrary distributive schemes, the integrity of the family, social mobility, the free market, cost effective or efficient government policies, and democracy. Others support meritocracy because they value rewards being distributed by effort and ability, individual autonomy, equal opportunity, social mobility, competition, and rule by the best. Often these values come into direct conflict with each other or can be made to support and oppose the same policies. Nevertheless, the philosophical debate can frame public opinion by pointing us towards potential problems with the meritocratic ideal.

Chapter 3 offers readers a glimpse into the conflict by presenting evidence of majority support and opposition to meritocracy. Most Americans believe that hard work and intelligence should be rewarded, but they also value using non-merit criteria for the distribution of social goods. Many Americans believe anyone can achieve success if they are willing to work hard, but they also know that race, gender, and social background can influence one's outcome in life. African Americans and whites have much in common when it comes to their idea of the good society; both groups believe that everyone should be given an equal opportunity to succeed. The difference is that most whites view the world as a meritocracy where everyone can succeed, while African Americans are less certain of that prospect.

In the specific case of inheritance taxation, chapter 4 finds that Americans flatly reject the meritocratic ethos. After a discussion of the history of inheritance, it finds that the distribution of wealth along hereditary lines is accepted by most Americans. This is in direct contradiction to the proposition that everyone should work for their money. There is support for the reduction or elimination of the estate tax that most likely stems from a generalized anti-tax sentiment, unrealistic optimism, and sympathy for small business owners and farmers. However, the estate tax issue is a very low priority for most Americans. This is not surprising given that so few are affected by it. Most Americans would prefer a reduction in the taxes that actually affect them, such as the income or fuel tax, rather than a reduction of the estate tax. When Americans are

told that the estate tax pays for social security and education programs, public opinion supports the tax. In this way framing has a significant impact on majority opinion on the issue.

Chapter 5 begins by providing readers with a short history of affirmative action policy in the US, from the 1960s civil rights struggles to the lawsuits over college admissions in 2003. It then gives an overview of the debate over the justness of the policy. Most Americans believe that discrimination is not very prevalent and this is the key to understanding differences of opinion about affirmative action. Most African Americans don't support race-based preferences that discriminate against whites, but they do tend to believe that racial preferences are needed to correct injustice and to provide a level playing field for all. Both the supporters and opponents of affirmative action use meritocratic values to make their case. Opponents argue that merit alone should decide who gets selected for promotions or college admissions, while supporters argue that society should do everything it can to give people an opportunity to acquire the skills and assets that would allow them to overcome discrimination.

What does all of this mean for democracy? Chapter 6 begins with a brief history of mass behavior that shows the reader how groups can be irrational and violent even when each of the group's members is not. For that reason, democratic theory has often been defensive about the role that "the people" should play in a democratic polis. The result is an American constitutional system that places a check on the power of the people. In today's world we now have methods to collect and aggregate individual preferences. But can public opinion polls actually serve as a measure of the "will of the people," especially when "the people" seem ignorant, volatile, and contradictory? The rise of value pluralism in political theory poses a new problem for those who study society. While it may be good to allow different values to be expressed, contradictory values produce illogical and irrational preferences. Therefore, relying on "core values" to guide government is extremely problematic.

The final chapter summarizes the findings of the project. Public opinion on questions of meritocracy is contradictory. But this is no reason to ignore or dismiss public opinion. With an understanding of where the conflict lies, educators can ask students the difficult questions and political leaders can prepare for difficult choices.

Notes

1. quoted in McNamee & Miller 2004, 95

2. If one thinks this is a historical fluke, it should be noted that on July 18, 2006, Todd Stroger was selected by party leaders to replace his father, incumbent John Stroger, on the ballot for Cook County Board President after his father suffered a stroke. On November 7, 2006, he was elected despite protestations of nepotism by his challenger. On August 21, 2008, Illinois Senate President Emil Jones announced that he would like his

son to take his seat when he retires. Other Illinois politicians with political parents include Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan, Illinois Comptroller Dan Hynes, U.S. Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr., and U.S. Congressman Daniel Lipinski.