



Meritocracy and the Motivation Hypothesis

Why Meritocracy is an Incorrect Theory of Human Effort

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Abstract

As a system for distribution and social organization, meritocracy has not reduced inequalities or increased social mobility, the things that made it appealing in the first place. Until now, it has been mostly criticized for its failure to live up to the expectation that it would be an equalizing mechanism, and critics have pointed to problems with the correct and impartial implementation of its methods. Nonetheless, this essay adds to what is known as principled critique, which opposes meritocratic systems, and addresses how meritocracy misunderstands human motivation and the relationship it has with effort. It also discusses how the empirical sequence of events does not always follow the order meritocracy requires or presupposes. The mismatch of meritocracy with the human condition and social context, which stems from its ethical rather than empirical foundations, makes it impossible for it to reduce inequality or counterbalance privilege.

Keywords

Meritocracy; Principled Critique; Motivation; Effort; Inequality; Competition.

Introduction

In theory, meritocracy is a system of political, economic and social rewards (money, goods or power) granted to people for their merit, which—in neoliberal societies—combines skills and effort. In other words, it is a system where achievements are the result of effort and skills instead of wealth or social position (Scully, 2015; Kim y Choi, 2017). This apparently simple model has several not so obvious implications. Roughly stated it implies that:

- a. There is a performance-based competition system.
- b. People are motivated to participate in it by the desire to obtain goods, money or social position.
- c. The access to this competition is open either because of an absence of restrictions or the presence of equal opportunities (Kim y Choi, 2017). Individuals show their merit though their results in competition.
- d. Rewards are awarded to those who make the greater effort and possess better skills, that is, to the most ‘meritorious’, who should be precisely those who obtain the best results.

Meritocracy assumes that people strive to obtain what they want and, given the opportunity, they take it to materialize their wishes. Thus, chronologically, first comes the individual’s voluntary and spontaneous effort to obtain something; second, there are opportunities to access what she wishes to obtain; third. A competition to show merit based on performance; and, fourth, the materialization of the rewards pursued though that performance.

Meritocracy pretends to be a fair and productive mechanism for the distribution of goods and power. It promises greater mobility and justice than systems based on class or rigid social structures, since people would be free to climb the social ladder on the basis of their own effort—an asset to which everyone has access—and of their talent—skills that in theory are randomly distributed, regardless of social background—. It promises efficiency because it is based on a performance competition system, which presupposes that every person’s effort is channeled and coordinated to

obtain more and better results, which would benefit society as a whole. These elements make it a popular ideology in neo-liberal societies, particularly where individuality and the personal responsibility typical of the Protestant ethic are highly valued (McNamee & Miller, 2009). Meritocracy has been widely applied—or so it is though, as some authors argue (Montes López & O'Connor, 2019; Zivony, 2019)—in education systems and a diversity of labor milieus with ever increasing questionable results (Littler, 2017; Markovits, 2019; McNamee & Miller, 2009).

The most frequent criticisms of meritocracy are related to the fact that it is an ideology that has not actually been applied, it has only been partially applied, or is imperfectly applied (McNamee & Miller, 2009; Zivony, 2019) and to the fact that it has proven to have significant adverse effects, such as increasing and/or justifying existing inequality (Littler, 2017; Markovits, 2019). However, there is still little opposition to meritocracy as a desirable system (such as that of Littler, 2017). That is, in general, we pursue more and better meritocracies without realizing that this system does not, and cannot, live up to its own promises of social justice.

Currently, meritocracy is mainly an ideological system, which means that it is a system of beliefs that creates particular worldviews and power dynamics that have served to legitimize hierarchies and inequalities in contemporary societies (McCoy y Major, 2007; Son Hing *et al.*, 2011; Krozer, 2018; Jin y Ball, 2020). This belief system is based on notions supposedly correct and impartial, but they are not. That is, the theory of the human condition and the nature of social interaction underlying the meritocratic ideology is a failed theory—a distorted understanding of reality—in at least two aspects that tend to go unnoticed: first is how this theory understands human motivation and its relation to effort; second, the chronological sequence of the events involved in meritocratic processes.

The problem of meritocracy being founded on a failed theory of the reality it is meant to organize is that it ends imposing a series of values and expectations that are not consistent with the effects it produces and ironically leads to the conclusion that meritocracy has not been applied correctly or, worse, that people have not strived as they should to improve their life conditions (a more detailed discussion on this matter can be found in Sandel, 2020).

In what follows, I first argue that meritocracy loses sight of the relationship between effort and human motivation, and the effects this shortsightedness produces. In the following section I discuss how the sequence of events that supposedly should follow a meritocratic process is not fulfilled in some key cases, and the implications this has in an effort-based competition.

Effort as an Ethical Imperative

As said above, meritocracy posits that people achieve better life conditions based on their own effort. This is a two-sided coin: on the positive, people *can* better their lives with effort; on the negative they *have* to make efforts, regardless of whether they are able to. It should be noted that when we say effort, we are not talking about work but rather something more strenuous or sacrificed. But meritocracy has sowed (incepted) the idea that work must mean effort and that to aspire to a comfortable job is laziness—when it should be the aspiration of anyone with common sense. The implications of confounding work with effort are, in my opinion, tragic. I will come back to this point in a separate essay.

Effort, as any other strenuous and wearing endeavor, requires motivation. Social mobility is not attained through leisure or pleasure but through activities and situations that we would prefer to avoid if possible or, at least, that we would not pursue if its results were undesired or that we would try to attain through alternative ways if available. This is the nature of what we call effort, and motivation is what pushes us to make it despite the exhaustion it implies. The burdensome nature of effort means that individuals are not permanently nor spontaneously disposed to make it. Nor they should. They strive when they have the necessary motivation.

Nevertheless, meritocracy assumes that people should constantly auto-motivate themselves for effort, starting off either from scarcity or from an ethical imperative of keeping oneself occupied in acquiring more (goods or money or power). In some cases, the meritocratic convictions of certain social sectors may plunge to the perversion of accepting or producing scarcity so that people, especially the poorest, keep themselves motivated and striving. This meritocratic logic comes head on against a world that does not function under its principles: empirical facts not always follow the meritocratic chronology (see next section), and human motivation does not work as meritocracy presupposes.

On the one side, motivation is not a teleological phenomenon, i.e., it does not exist to achieve an aim. It follows a causal logic: something motivates someone because it echoes in with the person's emotional states, personality, desires, and nature as a human being. In other words, we do not motivate ourselves to make efforts to win a contest, rather we strive because the activity, the reward or the circumstances motivate us, because we find them interesting or because we need them desperately. When there is scarcity, motivation is even more important, because making an effort in such circumstances is considerably more burdensome, both in material and psychological terms.

The effort made by a person who has satisfactory standards of living nevertheless implies a certain degree of fatigue. But, for people living in poverty, deprivation or stress, effort means not only weariness but sacrifice and risk (detailed examples can be found in Banerjee y Duflo, 2011). What can motivate people in deprivation situations to make sacrifices and face risks? Scarcity is not a motivator in itself, not without the company of two key factors: the desire to obtain the expected results —or the fear of not obtaining them— and the possibility to do so (Maslow, 1991). If something seems impossible to achieve, we will simply not be motivated to make the effort to get there. Effort does not guarantee a reward, but it certainly guarantees a loss, at least through fatigue. In other words, without hope there is no effort.

To be fair, we must recognize that there are other ways to get people to strive when there is little hope of getting the desired results. Fear can be a powerful source of motivation to strive: the fear of losing the house I bought through a mortgage, fear of being laid-off if I do not reach certain sales goals or, more abstractly, to have a bad life if I decide to dedicate myself to a poorly rewarded career path in the labor market. However, if the effort a meritocratic society promotes emerges from fear, it is really following the same principle that underlies slave societies, where people are forced to maintain an effort that is of small profit to them, based on the fear of suffering.

On the flip side of the coin, there are many efforts sustained out from the great motivation produced by the activity involved, despite it not being well rewarded materially or socially. Pleasure or fondness are other important sources of motivation to exert ourselves, but they seem to be excluded from the capitalism's rewards game. David Graeber (2019) made it evident that some jobs are chosen for the pleasure or satisfaction of doing them, but for the same reason, although they are essential, they are poorly rewarded in the labor markets of most contemporary societies —education staff (especially in basic education), nursing, among others. In these cases, the motivation to choose and remain in those career paths comes from the satisfaction, not the rewards or the possibility of improving life conditions. That motivation is of such magnitude that at times the effort made is much greater than in many other well rewarded —moneywise— professions (e.g., dancers or Olympic athletes).

Other authors' critique has already posited that meritocratic systems only reward certain efforts and talents instead of the quantity required of each.¹ But my argument here is different: effort is not an asset to which everyone has equal access, and, therefore, it is not a good metric in a fair contest. The costs and benefits of effort and the probability to reach the goal compared to the fatigue it implies are part of the game. That is, in the game of life we take the risk of running to the next base if there are enough chances of reaching it before the ball does, if we have the energy to run or if we can return to the previous base, in case we do not reach the next one.

When deprivation increases the costs of making an effort or extends the time we need to sustain that effort in order to overcome scarcity and attain the desired results, motivation is much more important and difficult to maintain. The hope that motivates us depends on the availability of opportunities but also on the probability of transforming them in rewards, on the availability of resources and energy to sustain our anticipated efforts, or the conviction with which others believe (or not believe) in us,² etcetera.

If meritocracy is founded on effort and such effort depends on a motivation that is more difficult to obtain for the poor than for the rich, it is not an equalizing mechanism. Precisely, meritocracy does not plead for the equality of effort, but for the equality of opportunity, and here some hypocrisy seeps through: true justice would be that in order to attain, everyone would strive equally. Yet, people who face more adversity or deprivation need to make greater efforts than those

¹ See, for instance, the eloquent arguments of Blair Fix on this at <https://economicsfromthetopdown.com/2019/10/30/the-tyranny-of-meritocracy/>.

² See the research on the Rosenthal effect, also known as the Pygmalion effect, e.g. Ballestín González (2015).

with the same opportunity but less scarcity. Ultimately, this means that the people who make greater efforts are not necessarily those who get rewarded. The equality of opportunities does not level the effort required to seize them or to attain the same results as someone who historically has had more resources.

Thus, this meritocratic logic overlooks a fundamental aspect of effort: that it is an onerous and risky activity to which we are disposed only under certain conditions—as exemplified in the baseball analogy—and that it cannot be constant or permanent. The meritocratic discourse pretends that individuals facing deprivation make efforts to provide themselves of what they lack, that is, that they make deprivation a motivator to exert themselves to obtain it. And if they are unsuccessful, it would be because they did not make enough effort, since the opportunities are available (if they actually are).

In this way, we can see that the meritocratic equation—*effort + talent = merit* and *merit* ⇒ *reward*—expresses no more than a fragment of the totality human effort and it does so out of the psychological and real circumstances in which it really occurs. By ignoring the relationship between effort and motivation, assuming that deprivation is enough for people to have the ethical and moral responsibility to strive, meritocracy posits that human beings function and react in non-human ways, and that the effort's magnitude is not to be considered in or made part of the reward distribution scheme. Even more, it assumes that effort is an equally distributed resource among the population and, therefore, a fair comparative criterion between people, which is not true.

Effort (supposedly) before reward

Besides presupposing that people must face scarcity with effort, the meritocratic ideology also ignores chronological relationship between motivation and achievement that can be empirically observed in different social contexts. Motivation, far from being intrinsic to human beings, depends on a series of factors, among them, previous achievements and psychological wellbeing.

In the meritocratic logic, people first strive and then, achieve, or in other words, people who strive are later rewarded. This order may occur in some cases but not always; it may even be reverted when it comes to privileged people. Ethnographic studies have shown how privileged youths might argue that they strive and yet they often do not. They learn how to get opportunities and results by rather comfortable means, thanks to training received regarding a number of attitudes and behaviors that protect them and provide them with a head start (Khan, 2012; Khan y Jerolmack, 2013). If we look closely, there are several real examples that illustrate how privilege speaks about meritocracy but does not put it in action.

How is it that the privileged can obtain results without effort? We can examine a concrete example: A student at a private university won an international design contest as the result of a BA course assignment.³ The contest required decorating a pre-established figure, and for it the student used one of her country's traditional indigenous textile designs, of which obviously she was not the intellectual author. The prize was a substantial sum of money and a trip abroad to attend the inauguration of the exhibit where her work was to be displayed. In this way someone belonging to the small sector that can attend a private university, took for herself the efforts of traditional artisans, took a teacher's effort driving his students to challenge themselves beyond the classroom, and completed the assignment. At this point it is crucial to distinguish between effort and work. This person worked in the task, but we cannot say that she strove more than other students, since she did not create an original design. She followed instructions and simply completed the assignment in her own best possible way, so we can neither say that she made more efforts than her teacher who searched for new pedagogical strategies. Nevertheless, she received a prize, a social and economic reward not proportional to her effort or her creative talent, a prize that nor the design's intellectual author nor the teacher, who made efforts to stimulate students' work and ambitions, ever won. This success might give the student motivation to strive, to seek out other contests, work more or have more confidence in her designs, or search for a scholarship abroad, but the reward that will kick-start any of these came to her before she made efforts of her own to better her life's conditions. It could be argued that this example is borderline cheating, unethical behavior or breaking intellectual property regulations. On the contrary, I think that it clearly reflects meritocracy's daily life. The case was not considered cheating—perhaps because she won the contest and, in a way, winning legitimized something that

³ More details on this case can be found at Reporte Indigo (Indigo Staff, 2020).

would otherwise might have been questioned— and it was not considered plagiarism either. Firstly, because current laws do not protect the intellectual property rights of the traditional designs of historically marginalized indigenous people. And secondly, because even if the laws protected them, the large political and economic disadvantages of indigenous people would make any legal case too difficult to pursue. Consequently, the privileged are able to appropriate other people's effort and claim the rewards for themselves.

The inequalities this example illustrates are the same that exist in the daily life those who inhabit societies with meritocratic aspirations. The fact that, for privileged people, rewards can come before effort is no minor detail, since it is one means by which inequality affects personal motivation. According to van Dijk and colleagues (2020), social inequality has observable effects on motivation, and members of groups that have historically been discriminated can be expected to have less motivation because they have experienced more negative kicks and have less opportunities and rewards. Their model proposes:

Positive kicks (e.g., getting a desired job or promotion) are supposed to result in motivation to work harder, whereas negative kicks (e.g., not getting that job or promotion) decrease such motivation (see also Heckhausen et al., 2010). This motivation, in turn, is expected to shape the individual's job performance and subsequent opportunities and rewards. Because being granted [or denied] an opportunity or reward constitutes a kick that according to the theory of limited differences enhances [or inhibits] an individual's motivation, over time the accumulation of such kick-reaction sequences leads to a 'multiplier effect' (Cole & Singer, 1991, p. 283): increasing differences in job performance and associated opportunities and rewards between those experiencing positive kicks versus those experiencing negative kicks. Members of historically disadvantaged groups can be expected to be less motivated because they have experienced more negative kicks and have fewer initial opportunities and rewards.

In fact, these authors contend that when entering the supposedly meritocratic labor market, a person's initial advantages accumulate and this increases the original inequality, rather than offsetting it, due to the negative effect of adversity in motivation.

Meritocracy is implemented in unequal societies (egalitarian one would not need it), where rewards depend less on individual performance than on opportunity and opportunity depends less on effort than on personal circumstances. This is because effort is dependent on motivation, which in turn is dependent on previous opportunities and achievements, closely linked to the social position of origin. Thus, it is possible that effort is the result of rewards and not the other way around. The meritocratic premises assume that the effort always comes first, but if individual effort and skill can be rewarded before they are expressed it either implies that merit (*effort + talent*) is not the same as performance, or that performance is not the measure of merit. In this case, if performance is not required to obtain merit, what is the sense of the competition that meritocratic systems promote? Rewards might as well go directly to people who strive regardless of results. Or they could be handed to people with the best results regardless of effort—as it happens among the privileged—and avoid the simulation of a fair contest with equal opportunities. With the disconnection of performance from merit, what value can its merit measure have?

Since meritocracy does not incorporate equalizing mechanisms in its design in terms of motivation and magnitude of effort required to attain a result, the system will remain incapable to level the playing field for people with unequal social origins. Therefore, any meritocratic contest among people in unequal socio-economic situations would be unfair, and the reward distribution will be biased towards reproducing or exacerbating the original inequality. The only ways to avoid this trap would be to eliminate the competition factor or ensuring that contests happen only between people with equal access to privilege and resources.

Yet, regarding the need of a contest, meritocracy's perspective of human nature is notoriously limited. The meritocratic system assumes that to be productive, people need motivation induced by inequality and/or by the competition for resources (Atria *et al.*, 2020, p. 1233). This is a fallacy because people are perfectly able to strive and be productive without the need of resources being conditional to promote/coerce their effort.

Morgan and colleagues explicitly describe this unempirical logic when they propose that the opposite of a meritocratic contest is one where the winner is chosen by random, supposing it would be considered unfair, and would "yield little effort in contestants, since effort would not increase their

chance of winning” (Morgan, Tumlinson y Vardy, 2018, p. 3, author’s translation). The rationale is, in brief, that “when performance ranking is pure noise, nobody does anything” (Morgan, Tumlinson y Vardy, 2018, p. 4). This conclusion may work for their model, but it certainly does not occur in reality. (Ironically, their model shows that excessive meritocracy reduces productivity.)

My hypothesis is that if people are forced to take part in any form of ranking competition where they have no way of influencing the outcome and where, in the end, positions are determined by chance, then they will end up doing what they like the most or what they need the most instead of ‘doing nothing’, because doing nothing is boring or because it is a waste of time that could be spent doing something that brings pleasure if it cannot generate profit. And this is what is inconceivable in meritocratic capitalism: letting people be free to do what they need or desire. But let us imagine for a moment that everyone’s wages—from the best paid banker to the least paid worker—were all placed in a raffle. Everyone would receive a monthly ticket to participate in the wage raffle, and luck would decide who gets what. We will sometime get a banker’s salary and sometimes a crop field day-worker’s pay. In this case, would you remain at your current job, would you stop working at all, or would you pursue another occupation?

To sum up. Merit-based systems of competition assume that people have a uniform, constant and spontaneous capacity to strive. This is not so. Effort is not inherent to human action, it is dependent on motivation, circumstances, and opportunities. Also, it cannot be sustained indefinitely: overcoming larger adversities requires more resources, either to sustain efforts for longer periods of time or to increase the intensity of the exertion involved, to obtain certain results. Consequently, a competition based in personal effort is not an even game field when people have access to different amounts of resources. Besides, the privileged have at their disposal ways to obtain opportunities and rewards from apparent effort (without actual exertion), and so their advantages are reproduced and remain protected, even if they must compete with other people.

To conclude, the meritocratic ideology set itself out to combat social inequality without understanding it and forgot to integrate the necessary mechanisms for this purpose. Believing that inequality came from the fact that some people were excluded or exempt from the competition, it offered an open tournament, without noting that some racers have not had any breakfast or that some others are friends with the judge. And it has left equality of opportunities up to the governments and other institutions, ignoring that the marginalized hardly ever reach the positions where decisions are made. In such conditions, as one can empirically attest, the tournament can become an obstacle to social mobility. And the imperative of effort—despite all else and as a measure of worthiness—can affect people’s wellbeing (this point is addressed elsewhere).

In the end, meritocracy was meant to deal with the challenge of opening access to good quality life conditions that had been reserved for a few in such a way that a person’s initial disadvantages would not skew her possibilities of social mobility. However, instead *unlocking* access to resources that were monopolized by systems of privilege (such as noble titles), it established a competition to *regulate* access to those resources. This solution (competing) is completely disjointed from reality, in the sense that it is practically impossible to win against someone who competes with advantages; instead, it responds to the principle that we should earn things from our effort. Thus, it ended up being an answer (compete) to the wrong question (justice rather than equality) because it was built upon an ethical principle rather than from an empirical reality. Since meritocracy does not recognize any ‘merit’ in being disadvantaged, it fails to reduce preexisting inequality.

Undoubtedly, what is more surprising, not only of meritocracy, but of its critics, is that they accept or, worse, they take for granted the moral value of peoples’ efforts, struggles and suffering to obtain a good life. As if it were the most Catholic of the Protestant ethics. When did we stopped rewarding work and started to promote and reward sacrifice?

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