

The Meritocracy Dilemma

Introduction

In this paper, I contend that meritocracy is a myth. By calling meritocracy a myth, I do not mean that it functions as deliberate ideological cover for inequality; I mean that meritocracy cannot satisfy its own justificatory conditions in a liberal society and so collapses as a coherent fairness claim. Therefore, while it does not “disguise structural inequality,” I consider it a “myth.”

This paper specifically challenges *desert-based meritocracy* (DBM),¹ which states that the allocation of social goods is intrinsically justified because individuals *deserve* outcomes according to their merits (Mulligan, “Meritocracy” sec. 2.2). Crucially, my argument is developed within the context of liberal societies, since only under liberalism is desert intelligible as a proposed fairness criterion.²

In short, the task of the desert-based meritocrat (henceforth simply “meritocrat”) is to show that liberalism and DBM are compatible. I argue that they are not.

To do so, I first outline the conditions that justify the existence of DBM, after which I present an empirical argument for the incompatibility between DBM and liberal societies. I then introduce a stronger argument that strengthens the incompatibility in response to some possible critiques and conclude by considering some further objections and ostensible alternatives for the meritocrat.

Justifying Meritocracy

DBM claims to be a *just* system of allocation where positions and rewards go to those who earn them through legitimate talent and effort while disregarding irrelevant characteristics

(J. S. Fishkin 22). But what is justice? We can distinguish between two interpretations (J. S. Fishkin 22; cf. Rawls, sec. 47):

- (1) *Procedural justice* states that if the procedure involved in the distribution of social goods is just, then the outcome of that distribution is just. John Rawls illustrates this with gambling—as long as the procedure is carried out according to fair, pre-established protocols, any resultant distribution of goods, even if highly unequal, is just (74–76).
- (2) *Background justice* regards the circumstances that must hold for procedural justice to be meaningful. That is, preexisting institutions must be fair before the procedure is executed; otherwise, the procedure merely launders whatever inequalities preceded it.

Each principle individually does not suffice in capturing “justice” in the putative sense. Procedural justice would merely amplify pre-existing inequalities, and background justice would offer no guarantee against morally irrelevant factors being ignored in the distribution of social goods. Consequently, any strong characterization of “justice” must satisfy both interpretations. For DBM to embody procedural justice is straightforward—simply forbid the consideration of irrelevant characteristics when distributing social goods. What is more interesting is how DBM seeks to encompass background justice.³

Now, Rawls explicates two ways in which background justice may be violated: *natural contingencies* and *social contingencies* (sec. 12). Natural contingencies represent arbitrary differences in ability that are innate, such as strength, intelligence, and creativity. Social contingencies represent differences in ability that are due to arbitrary social circumstances such as family wealth, class background, and inherited connections. Under DBM, social contingencies must be eliminated since arbitrary facts about one’s social position have no bearing on one’s merits, and life chances ought not to be systematically predictable from morally arbitrary factors

about birth circumstances.⁴ I term this *equality of life chances* (ELC), following J. S. Fishkin (32–34). Whether natural contingencies should also be mitigated via something like Rawlsian redistribution lies beyond this essay’s scope, though meritocrats themselves typically reject such redistribution as incompatible with desert.⁵

So, DBM is normatively justified if and only if ELC holds.

Meritocracy’s Dilemma

Liberalism upholds the principle of *family autonomy* (FA): that parents have the right to invest time, attention, and values in their children (J. S. Fishkin 39–40). This means that parents differentially shape their child’s merit-relevant traits, which eventually causes an unequal distribution of social goods. This violates ELC. The meritocrat now faces a dilemma: any reasonable interpretation of liberalism necessitates FA,⁶ but FA undermines ELC, which, in turn, undermines DBM.

In short, liberalism and DBM are incompatible.

Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift offer a sophisticated response in *Family Values*, arguing that FA is not a unitary principle but decomposes into (a) “familial relationship goods,” realized through intimate partialities like bedtime stories, conversation, moral modeling, etc., and (b) “conferring advantages” like elite schooling and bequest.

Although they acknowledge (a)’s potential for eventually producing a differential distribution of social goods, they claim it also must be protected from outside interference since it is constitutive of “family value.” For example, given two children of identical native ability, one raised by a lawyer who spontaneously discusses argument and evidence at the dinner table will develop different cognitive dispositions from one raised by a manual laborer (Lareau, ch. 1).

At the same time, Brighthouse and Swift assert that (b) can be regulated, taxed, or abolished without damaging the family as such.

However, this decomposition is unstable: the mechanisms that realize familial relationship goods are the same ones that transmit conferring advantages. A parent's spontaneous dinner-table conversation simultaneously realizes a familial relationship good and produces the cognitive profile that constitutes the child's conferred advantage. The state cannot neatly resolve this tension through wealth redistribution or integrating schools because the advantage is not a separable material transfer.

Yet this causal argument leaves the meritocrat several routes of response:

- The policy objection: Empirical evidence serves only as testimony of a policy failure rather than a structural impossibility between FA and ELC (Mulligan, *Justice* sec. 4.5; Roemer).
- The threshold objection: FA and ELC are compatible since the latter does not require perfect equalization, only that life chances are not predictable from morally arbitrary facts beyond some acceptable threshold (López 27–41).

A Stronger Argument

To address these concerns, I present an argument that identifies the constitutive—not merely causal—nature of FA on merit: the *constitution argument*.

First, we must differentiate between intrinsic and developed reward bases. The former regards bases that are present at the moment of one's birth, representing immutable, fundamental characteristics. For instance, no amount of training extends an adult's genetically determined height ceiling (Visscher et al.). The latter regards bases that are developed over time, through

repeated observation or practice. This represents both skills, such as the ability to play violin, and moral dispositions, such as humility or good-naturedness.

For our purposes, it is important to note that in addition to intrinsic bases, DBM is also able to satisfy developed bases; therefore, the set of traits FA licenses parents to shape and the set of traits DBM rewards are not disjoint. As an example, the discipline that wins a violinist her audition is at least partly due to her parents' years of effort to develop discipline. Call this the *constitution claim*: that FA partly constitutes the merit-relevant traits of persons.⁷ Admittedly, it is difficult to separate intrinsic and developed bases, but the constitution claim only requires that meritocrats grant that a *non-trivial* proportion of the bases are developed, a minimal epistemic demand. Additionally, family of origin is entirely morally arbitrary from the child's perspective; hence, FA-induced reward base differentials are morally arbitrary differentials. It follows, then, with DBM's rewarding of merit-relevant traits, that the effect of FA's differential cultivation is the morally arbitrary differential distribution of social goods. In other words, it entails a negation of ELC. But justified DBM requires ELC.

Thus, FA is incompatible with ELC.

Replies to the Meritocrat

The constitution argument closes both the policy and threshold objections raised earlier. Since the overlap between FA's formative sphere and DBM's reward base is definitional rather than contingent (FA, by stipulation, shapes precisely the merit-relevant traits DBM rewards), the incompatibility cannot be resolved through better policy. Furthermore, the incompatibility now persists even on moderate readings of ELC, since the definitional overlap holds, via the constitution claim, regardless of the threshold at which ELC is set.

The meritocrat might raise two further objections at this point.⁸

First, that DBM rewards effort, not capacity, and effort is independent of FA (Mulligan, *Justice* ch. 7; Sher, ch. 4). Even if FA shapes intrinsic and developed capacities, the meritocratic claim is that what one does with those capacities is what ultimately deserves reward. Effort is exercised by the agent and so cannot be morally arbitrary in the way intrinsic capacities are. But effort is itself a developed disposition; work ethic, time preference, intellectual curiosity, and the like are paradigmatically the traits FA cultivates (Duckworth, ch. 10). The effort-capacity distinction therefore does not insulate any subset of merit-relevant traits from FA; the objection collapses into a special case of the constitution claim. Effort, like other developed bases, is at least partly constituted by FA.

Second, that aptitude for being developed both generally and in specific areas is itself an intrinsic base. To illustrate, some people might intrinsically have a higher potential for learning languages, meaning that holding all aspects of FA constant, the child better at language learning gains a larger reward base in that area. As such, FA is merely manifesting a reward base that is intrinsic and thus fails to contradict ELC. In fact, since it seems at least possible that this could affect all developed bases, it entirely undermines the constitution argument. But this counterpoint is implausible both epistemologically and empirically. For developmental sensitivity to matter, we must first be able to detect it. A child with high mathematical aptitude raised without mathematical exposure will not be identifiable as having that potential, because the aptitude only becomes visible through development. So DBM, which has to operate on observables, ends up rewarding the aptitudes that FA has elected to develop, not aptitudes simpliciter. This claim also faces a deeper problem. Modern empirical developmental research shows that aptitudes are “interactive,” which means that aptitudes emerge through the interaction of intrinsic features

with developmental inputs, and the same person in different developmental environments would have measurably different aptitudes even before any specific skill is trained (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 568–86; Turkheimer et al. 623–28). This challenges the very concept of intrinsic potential, since at any point of measurement, a reward base is always saturated with the influence of FA.

Alternative Meritocracies

Finally, faced with the constitution argument, the meritocrat has a few distinct alternatives:

- Abandon FA and institute standardized, state-controlled nurseries and schools for children. Clearly, this would flout liberal principles, both in that the right of parents over their children would be violated and that the state now has the unilateral capability to determine what traits count as merit-relevant. What's more, the state's chosen traits become what DBM rewards, which means that the outcome is not merit-based so much as it is merely state-preference-based. Also, differential treatment of children (e.g., that one institution has more educated nurses than another) may continue, even under this centralized system.
- Weaken bottlenecks; that is, multiply the routes through which talent can be recognized and rewarded.⁹ But this doesn't really solve the problem that FA poses. Here, it is claimed that once there is a diversity of paths one could take in order to achieve some desired social position, that family advantage would be minimized. But this is not necessarily true. Given n options to reach a desired social position, FA would shape the developed bases relevant to each path, so multiplying paths multiplies the channels of FA transmission. Yet further increasing the number of

available paths does not eliminate the transmission mechanism. As the number of pathways grows arbitrarily large, the criteria for a desired social position can be imagined to become so amorphous and convoluted that the system is no longer a meritocracy in any meaningful sense.

- Re-impose ELC after the execution of FA repeatedly, ad infinitum. But this concedes that DBM requires permanent external correction to sustain its own justificatory conditions, meaning DBM is not a self-standing principle of justice but a temporary corrective mechanism dependent on state interventions to restore a favorable condition. In fact, at this point, why not simply implement the egalitarian framework directly? Since the corrective mechanism would essentially be doing all the genuine distributive work, DBM becomes redundant. In short, the meritocrat would have abandoned meritocracy in all but name.

Conclusion

Meritocracy is a myth because it is fundamentally incompatible with liberal societies, and therefore, any desert-based argument in favor of it within a liberal framework is fundamentally confused. So really, we must ask ourselves not whether desert-based meritocracy is a myth, but whether we are willing to give up the very foundations of liberalism to affirm it.

Endnotes

¹ The alternative is instrumental meritocracy: an allocation of goods based on merit is desirable because it produces the best outcome. Mulligan (“Meritocracy”) and Daniels (207–08) distinguish these two forms of meritocracy and show that belief in instrumental meritocracy does not necessitate a corresponding belief in desert-based meritocracy. Support for instrumental meritocracy is relatively uncontroversial, and in either case, it is outside the scope of this paper. I accept it *prima facie*.

² Most non-liberal frameworks ground distribution in lineage, divine sanction, or collective duty, leaving no opening for individual desert to function as a fairness criterion. The notable exception to this is the Chinese Confucian framework. This framework, however, is not common explored or advocated for in the best, and therefore, will be left outside the consideration of this paper. Additionally, while many liberals reject meritocracy, here I make only the claim that meritocracy requires liberalism, not that liberalism requires meritocracy.

³ Libertarians might object that DBM need not satisfy background justice, but many libertarians, most prominently Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, entirely reject meritocracy. These intricacies make the discussion of libertarian political theory beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴ For instance, Mulligan suggests such redistributive policies in *Justice and the Meritocratic State*, advocating for inheritance taxes greater than 60%, the elimination of hereditary corporate control, a top marginal tax rate of roughly 80%, and similar measures.

⁵ This rejection is explicit in Sher (20–30), who argues that desert attaches to the exercise of talent and effort regardless of causal origin, and in Miller (156–59), who holds that individuals deserve the fruits of their natural abilities as expressed through contribution. Mulligan, while more hedged, concurs (*Justice* sec. 2.3).

⁶ Of note is the fact that FA itself is not a social contingency; it is simply the right of parents to exercise differential approaches to raising their offspring. FA, however, produces a negation of ELC.

⁷ Unlike Rawls’s luck objection, which requires the contested premise that natural endowments are morally arbitrary, the constitution argument needs only that developed bases be partly FA-shaped. Meritocrats may concede natural-talent desert and still lose.

⁸ Prominent defenders of DBM, such as Mulligan, Sher, and Miller, focus primarily on rebutting Rawlsian objections to natural contingencies as desert bases (Sher, ch. 2; Miller, ch. 7; Mulligan, *Justice* sec. 2.3). I grant their case *prima facie*, since the constitution argument shows that even granting their position, DBM cannot be sustained in liberal societies.

⁹ Joseph Fishkin identifies the main “bottlenecks” as standardized testing, elite higher education, professional licensing, and similar mechanisms (*Bottlenecks*, ch. 3–4).

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