

On Meritocracy

If you:

- Often doubt whether you're good enough.
- Question the purpose of school. Note that this is different from "education."
- Find yourself stuck in a cycle of competition.
- Or more simply, if you've ever felt:

What went wrong? Why is our politics so polarized, and why do different groups of people hate each other?

Why is elitism so prevalent? Haven't you seen students from prestigious universities secretly sneer at most people, or encountered people who are successful by worldly standards but extremely narcissistic?

Why does the gap between losers and winners seem to be growing? And why do we always feel like we're losing?

Then this note is for you.

Most of this content is just notes (I don't have a single original thought), and the ideas come from American political philosopher Michael Sandel. You might be familiar with his undergraduate course on justice at Harvard.

If you're interested, you can look up his book (and a TED talk) **The Tyranny of Merit**, as well as episode 205 of the podcast **Philosophize This**.

So, what's merit and meritocracy? Let's start by asking ChatGPT:

"Merit refers to the quality of being particularly good or worthy, especially so as to deserve praise or reward. It can pertain to a person's skills, abilities, achievements, or any other qualities that justify recognition or advancement."

So your skills are your merit, but so are your achievements, certificates, and reputation. In other words, anything that can prove your abilities can be considered your merit. But since abilities need to be measured, merit in a practical sense is often almost synonymous with your track record, your test scores, and your resume.

"Meritocracy is a system, organization, or society in which people are selected, rewarded, and advanced based on their individual merit."

There doesn't seem to be a problem, right? Don't we want a meritocratic society? After all, it seems to promise fairness and ensures that your doctor and driver are selected based on their abilities.

In a meritocratic system, factors like talent, effort, skills, and achievements are the primary criteria for success, rather than wealth, social status, or other non-merit-based factors.

These definitions aren't wrong. But here's the critique of meritocracy. The first point is too simple to elaborate: A truly meritocratic society can never exist. All non-merit-based factors will influence how much merit you can attain, even with equal effort and talent. More than 50% of students at Ivy League universities come from the top 1% of income families. We are simply not born equally, and that's a fact—not being bitter.

So, in an ideal situation (some mechanism ensures that when schools and jobs assess your merit, they can eliminate innate factors and only calculate your pure merit), can meritocracy hold up philosophically?

The problem lies in the next natural belief:

"If everyone is given equal opportunities, then the winners deserve their winnings."

So the winners become arrogant, and the losers feel inferior. It evolves further: The poor resent the rich because they recognize that much wealth doesn't come from "ability" and "hard work." Or, to a lesser extent, less successful people feel that elites are always arrogant and look down on them. They don't like you sitting in Starbucks with a Mac, making a PowerPoint, and then going out for omakase at night. They don't like you not breaking a sweat but still complaining. And often, they're not wrong.

Elites often unintentionally look down on those less successful than them. "You should study hard and work hard," they say, without realizing the inherent insult in that statement. This deepens the losers' belief that "my situation is because I'm not working hard enough," often

leading them to overlook other equally important factors. The losers aren't stupid. When they realize this, they see the elites' unintentional comments as contempt.

Look at American politics, and this contradiction seems irreconcilable.

The growing contradiction between the two groups is structural.

Merit needs to be measured to be seen, which is why meritocracy is inherently flawed.

So, in the real world, where does merit come from? It's simple and straightforward: universities. The vast majority of politicians and entrepreneurs have one (or more) degrees from prestigious universities. But we often forget: Most people in China and most people in the U.S. (to take these two large countries as examples) don't have a college degree—"most" meaning about two-thirds.

But now, having a college degree is a prerequisite for a decent life and a respected job. Nowadays, even a bachelor's degree isn't enough, and even a master's degree isn't enough, and even attending a non-985 university isn't enough. This has to stop. We need to renew the dignity of work and respect for all. If our system doesn't respect the majority of people who haven't received an education from a 985 university, there will be great opposition among those playing within this system. It's not enough to only pay attention to and report on them when they go on strike. The streets, garbage, and sewage of Paris are evidence of this division.

China has the largest higher education system, and it's commendable that millions can attend university. For academics? Many do it for that, but more do it for the certificates and resumes

(this is a fact, don't be ashamed), because only then can they have a decent life and a respected job. If being a plumber were as respected as being a lawyer, if a plumber could earn as much as a lawyer (since I believe both are nearly equally important to our everyday lives, though plumbers have much less merit), then how many people would choose not to pursue university and certificates? But if you were a plumber in real life, good luck finding someone willing to date you. This again shows the system is flawed.

So you might be stressed because you're in this rat race for certificates and credentials, but in reality, we all just want a little love, a decent job, and not to be despised.

The competition is systemic. Let's appreciate the role of luck in life, stare into the mystery of fate, and embrace the real chill—a sense of humility that not everything I have should be attributed to my merits, instead of the bourgeois vibe we're all familiar with.

Compared to honor, we need deep humility even more.