A More Perfect Meritocracy

Two new books take aim at the moral failures of meritocracy. But we can advocate for a more just society without giving up on merit.

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The Cult of Smart: How Our Broken Education System Perpetuates Social Injustice
Fredrik deBoer
All Points Books, $28.99 (cloth)
The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?
Michael Sandel
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $28 (cloth)

We have some say in how our lives go, and yet our lives are also subjected to forces outside our control. Which part of this story do we emphasize? Conservatives tend to see the glass as half full, stressing both agential control over outcomes and personal responsibility for them. Progressives are more likely to highlight the causal role of outside factors—even when those factors are in some sense "internal," such as one's genetic makeup—and to caution us to err on the side of withholding blame for poor outcomes.

Educator and essayist Fredrik deBoer argues that there is one domain where this political pattern breaks down: in conversations about academic achievement. In the introduction to his new book *The Cult of Smart*, deBoer articulates the puzzle by drawing on blogger Scott Alexander's memory of having been praised for getting A in English but blamed for getting a C- in calculus:

Every time I was held up as an example in English class, I wanted to crawl under a rock and die. I didn't do it! I didn't study at all, half the time I did the homework in the car on the way to school, those essays for the statewide competition were thrown together on a lark without a trace of real effort. To praise me for any of it seemed and still seems utterly unjust.

On the other hand, to this day I believe I deserve a fricking statue for getting a C- in Calculus I. It should be in the center of the schoolyard, and have a plaque saying something like "Scott Alexander, who by making a herculean effort managed to pass Calculus I, even though they kept throwing random things after the little curly S sign and pretending it made sense."

Why, Alexander wonders, should praise and blame track what is clearly innate? "The compassionate, sympathetic, progressive position," he observes, is to deny that peoples' drinking problems—or obesity, or depression, or kleptomania—are up to them: we should not blame people for mental or physical illness by insisting that they can be overcome with sufficient effort. But, deBoer notes, "this thinking is anathema" among the same progressive circles "when applied to academic aptitude." Why do the very people who want to avoid blame for hereditary conditions treat academic success as though it were purely a matter of hard work?

DeBoer suggests that part of the explanation is a too hasty progressive repudiation of scientific work on intelligence. Confronted by the dark legacy of scientific racism, progressives are anxious to deny claims of group-level IQ differences, but in the same swoop they end up denying science that shows that individual IQ is at least 50 percent

heritable. Both Alexander and deBoer think this is a mistake. They propose that we can be consistently sympathetic and progressive only by facing up to the implications of hard-wired individual IQ differences: academic success and failure are no more "earned" than mental health or illness, and it is cruel to treat them as though they were.

For deBoer this argument is not only important in its own right. It is central to his book's critique of our meritocratic educational system. Written with the persuasive authority of a seasoned educator, *The Cult of Smart* is a "prayer for the untalented," as he calls it, focusing on both their "plight" and the plight of those who teach them. He makes an impassioned plea for realism both about what intellectually ungifted and scholastically unmotivated students can achieve and about what the school system can do to solve society's ills. DeBoer is a Marxist who hungers for a fully egalitarian society, lamenting the inequalities of privilege and wealth that characterize our own, but he does not believe that the educational system is the lever by which equality will be effected. The imposition of "higher standards" serves only to lower graduation rates, he argues, as well as to punish schools that lack the luxury to kick out struggling students. "Tell me how your students are getting assigned to your school," he writes, "and I can predict your outcomes."

DeBoer opens the book with a discussion of 2019's Varsity Blues college admissions scandal. Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel does the same in his new book *The Tyranny of Merit*. Both authors use this event to make the case that college admissions has become the fulcrum of our society's meritocratic machine: your social "worth" is so deeply predicated on the college you attend that rich parents are willing to break the law to secure a slight rise in the tier of college to which their children gain acceptance. And the parents hid their actions from their children because they wanted them to feel they had *earned* this status.

But both Sandel and deBoer make clear that their target is not this group of law-breakers. Nor is it parents who *legally* exchange massive donations for acceptances, or legacy admissions, or the fact that wealthier children are advantaged at every step along childhood's journey—from prenatal lead exposure all the way to SAT prep courses and expensive, application-padding extracurriculars. The moral problem, for both authors, is not that we fail to live up to the ideal of meritocracy (though we do), but that we take it as an ideal in the first place. Any system that predicates economic and social status on academic performance is intrinsically bad.

Sandel, like deBoer, objects most fundamentally to meritocracy's moral pretensions: if we believe that our success is up to us, we will credit ourselves for success and blame ourselves for failure. Meritocracy's ethic of positive self-belief—what Sandel calls a "rhetoric of rising"— produces "morally unattractive attitudes" of hubris among winners and resentment among losers. This, in turn, leads to social strife and undermines social solidarity. Sandel ranges widely over the history and politics of meritocracy, rooting it in the Protestant ethic of work as (epistemic) proof of one's moral worth. He locates the idea that the more productive should be reimbursed with more money in the classical economic liberalism of F. A. Hayek and Frank Knight and even the

welfare state liberalism of John Rawls. Sandel acknowledges that that these thinkers justified their proposed social systems on the grounds of efficiency, explicitly denying any claim that the more productive were "more valuable" or "deserved more." But Sandel nonetheless sees their views as the evolutionary ancestors of our current moral pretensions: "free-market liberalism and welfare state liberalism open the way to meritocratic understandings of success that they officially reject."

A crucial step in Sandel's telling of the genesis of meritocracy is the story of how former Harvard president James Conant transformed the university in the 1940s. By way of "a kind of quiet, planned coup d'etat," Sandel explains, Conant instituted the SAT and re-imagined public schools as serving a sorting function: instead of being ends in themselves, they would become "reconstructed for [the] specific purpose" of serving as a recruiting ground for a new meritocratic elite. Conant was activating a plan once proposed by Thomas Jefferson, who had described it thus: "twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually, and be instructed at the public expense."

In the present day, Sandel identifies a very wide range of phenomena as either causes or effects of meritocracy: populist political upheaval; helicopter parenting; the rise of globalization, technocracy and anti-immigrant sentiment; the transition to a knowledge economy; the 2008 economic crisis; debates over climate change; cultural differences between Americans and Europeans; rising suicide rates among twenty to twenty-four year olds; rising inequality; the fall of manufacturing in the United States; credentialism. As his discussion wanders over this territory, the guiding thread is the claim that meritocracy organizes society into self-satisfied winners and bitter losers.

Sandel is clearly onto something in claiming that "one of the deepest divides in politics today is between those with and those without a college degree." But I am not entirely persuaded by his story of a nation divided by hubris and resentment. For one thing, the empirical data he cites in painting a picture of the "winners" do not suggest self-satisfied complacency over having "earned" one's status: he describes "a mental health epidemic among privileged youth" and "inordinate levels of emotional distress among young people from affluent families," including those who end up at elite schools and show "unprecedented levels of distress." That does not sound like hubris. As for the resentment he ascribes to non-elites: resentment is the characteristic attitude of those with less who believe they deserve more. If Sandel were correct that non-elites blamed themselves for their own failure, one would predict that the primary expression of this self-understanding would be shame and depression rather than resentment.

Humans are given to hierarchy—we measure ourselves against those around us and strive to better our relative position—but we are, at the same time, unhappy that this is true of ourselves. This predicament is the product of two drives.

First, people are driven by a need for belonging, and a consequent motivation both to benefit the group and to be recognized as full-fledged members of it. Some positive

words for this drive are "cooperative" and "selfless"; some negative ones are "conformist" and "sheep." Second, people are inclined to hold themselves apart from the group, to stand out from it. When we approve of this inclination we describe it as "the pursuit of excellence" and call such a person "extraordinary" or "independent"; when we dislike it, we use words such as "uncooperative" and "egotistical" and accuse its bearer of "competitiveness" or "greediness." Switching between positively and negatively charged terms is one of the ways we artificially fit these warring drives into one social order.

People want to stand out; people do not want to be alone. Sandel and deBoer are arguing that we should let up on the first desire in order to better satisfy the second: less hierarchy in exchange for more solidarity, compassion, and egalitarianism. Their books propose a shift in ideals: down with the language of striving, of opportunity, of individual achievement and self-belief and positive affirmation. They encourage us to see success as being due more to good fortune than earned by hard work, in the hopes that this less aspirational, more fatalistic approach will facilitate more group cohesion. An "ethic of fortune," says Sandel, "appreciates the dimensions of life that exceed human understanding and control."

This aim is nowhere more evident than in the concrete changes each book proposes to our current order: deBoer would like twelve-year-olds to be able to choose to drop out of school, and Sandel proposes a lottery for admission at elite colleges. While I do not doubt that each author believes the world would be improved by these proposals, their primary focus in these books is clearly not public policy: their concrete suggestions occupy only a few pages, located near the ends of their books. Rather, their main task is to indicate the direction in which our ideology—first our rhetoric, eventually our values—should shift. We need to learn to accept that some twelve-year-olds simply aren't cut out for school; we should stop valorizing the selectivity of elite colleges.

What should we make of this project? Cultural shifts in ideology do happen, and Sandel and deBoer may be picking up on a trend: perhaps our society is on the verge of shifting to a less "stand out," more "fit in" model. Indeed it is striking that Ross Douthat, a conservative columnist, has also criticized meritocracy along very similar lines: "the meritocratic order ... insists that everything its high-achievers have is justly earned." But as a philosophical matter, Sandel and deBoer have not made a convincing argument that we have good reason to give up on the rhetoric of "earning" and "achievement" and "aspiration." This is because, while both authors emphatically insist that theirs is an attack on the concept of meritocracy itself, in fact their target only picks out an accident of our instantiation of it.

Let's go back to our opening puzzle. Why are people more inclined to hold genetics responsible for (lack of) mental health than for (lack of) academic or intellectual achievement? I think this is less puzzling than deBoer and Alexander contend. There is a significant difference between these two cases. It is a scientific truth that a person's life outcomes are, in a great variety of ways, a function of her genetic endowment (not just in matters of intelligence, however defined, but in many other behavioral and physical features, too). Nonetheless, the science of genetics cannot tell us what the

ethical consequences of this truth are—and more specifically, science cannot tell us that the ethical consequences of this fact are uniform for all traits. So even if, from a genetic point of view, mental health and intelligence were equally heritable, that wouldn't entail that our ethical responses to those facts should be the same. And in fact they arguably should not be.

Questions of mental health, weight regulation, or substance abuse are normatively bipartite: the relevant outcomes are either normal or abnormal. Achievement, by contrast, is normatively tripartite: it can be subnormal, normal, or supernormal. In the bipartite cases, we are faced only with the need to avoid blaming people for the subnormal condition, whereas in the tripartite cases we want to avoid blaming for subnormality and, in addition, we want to be able to credit and praise supernormality. In the bipartite cases, we get everything we want by ascribing outcomes to genetics—but doing so in the tripartite cases would thwart one of our (ethical) goals.

Let me illustrate with the case of athletics. Everyone knows that athletic achievement has a strong hereditary component, yet it is clear that we do not think of it as "entirely due to genes" or even "due to genes plus luck." Athletic stars serve as inspirational figures for young people who take them to represent the possibility of making something great of oneself. Nature might give you height or quick reflexes, but athletic excellence also requires years of concerted effort. By dint of this effort, we think of the stars as having earned their accomplishments. There is no tension between thinking that most people are not cut out for athletic accomplishment and thinking that the ones who succeed do so on the strength of their efforts. To recognize and admire and credit the winners, you don't need to think that an athletic failure—myself included—is to be blamed for insufficient effort. Kindness to athletic losers doesn't need to be bought at the price of indifference to athletic winners.

The question of who we praise and who we blame is not a scientific question, but an ethical one; there is no way to answer it except by deliberating seriously about the kind of society we want to live in. In that spirit, I want to propose a new candidate for what the "the compassionate, sympathetic, progressive position" should look like. First, we should incline toward crediting people for their achievements as being genuinely their own, the justly earned fruits of hard work and diligence, deserving of pride and a sense of accomplishment. Second, we should incline toward explaining away failures on the basis of genes, socioeconomic obstacles, bad luck, and so on—things beyond their control—in such a way to make clear that the attitude called for in response to failure is sympathy and readiness to assist. The successful should be proud of themselves, and when they see others fail, they should think: there but for the grace of God go I.

People rarely, if ever, deserve to fail, but people typically deserve their successes. To prove that this asymmetry is coherent, consider the ethos among a group of striving friends. When one of my academic friends faces a professional setback—a paper rejection, a fruitless job search, being denied tenure—the rest of us respond with sympathy and compassion. We do not say, "This was your fault for not working hard enough." Except under truly extraordinary circumstances, we do not take ourselves to be in

the business of blaming, faulting, and condemning our friends. But when that same person achieves some triumph, we would typically congratulate her for the fruits of her efforts. We credit her for her accomplishments without blaming her for her failures. One should not assume that this situation must boil down either to amiable exaggeration of someone's role in her triumphs or to well-meant but deceptive downplaying of her responsibility for her failures. There need be no white lies involved in our response, because it is ethically correct to respond asymmetrically to the role of chance in success and failure. The simple fact is that you can praise a student for his A without blaming him for his C. And this is, in fact, usually how you should act.

I believe we should credit *all* achievements, including those of the privileged: the talents of the rich do not magically develop themselves. But we should also recognize that when people had to overcome substantial obstacles to get where they are, they objectively achieved *more*, and deserve to be *even prouder* of themselves. We can say this without discrediting those who faced fewer obstacles, and of course as a society we should aim to remove as many of those obstacles as possible—while recognizing the truth of Sandel and deBoer's observation that the playing field will *never* be fully even, because some of the "obstacles" are internal. Still, respecting the essential unevenness of the playing field is, contrary to what Sandel and deBoer contend, compatible with crediting achievement. It *wouldn't* be compatible if crediting achievement entailed faulting lack of achievement. But that would only be the case if achievement were normatively bipartite; in fact, it is tripartite.

Let me conclude by bringing these philosophical reflections on achievement to bear on our socioeconomic system for distributing material rewards and social status—for it is at this edifice that Sandel's and deBoer's objections are ultimately directed. The argument I have given offers a way of separating our answer to the question of how we should distribute pluses such as riches, honors, fame, and recognition from our answer to the question of how we should distribute minuses such as poverty, shame, suffering, and precarity.

Depriving someone of the basics needed to live a decent life is a form of punishment, and arguably no one—except perhaps one guilty of grievous wrongdoing—deserves that. You can think that everyone deserves a decent life and *also* think that some people deserve more than that, in virtue of what they have achieved. And—this is what comes of accepting the asymmetry I've been arguing for—you can think that person A deserves material or social rewards for achievements that person B had no chance to produce (say, for genetic reasons, or due to sexism, or pure bad luck). The fact that chance played a role in A's success does not invalidate our rewarding him for it. But the fact that we can and should reward A does not entail that we are permitted to punish B for her lack of success. B deserves a decent life, even if she never earned the rewards we (justifiably) give only to A.

Because deBoer and Sandel take aim at the legitimacy of dipping below decency, they do not give any independent argument concerning the desert of those in the upper half of the distribution of outcomes—but that is really where meritocracy resides. Meritocracy is about rewarding success, not punishing failure. Consider the famous "motivational" speech from the 1992 film *Glengarry Glen Ross*:

We're adding a little something to this month's sales contest. As you all know, first prize is a Cadillac Eldorado. Anybody wanna see second prize? Second prize is a set of steak knives. Third prize is, you're fired.

All of us feel a jolt between second and third prize. That is the moment when "meritocracy" gets twisted and deformed into something punitive and vile. If our system of distributing meritocratic rewards to achievers depends on distributing degrading punishments to non-achievers, that is a strike against *our* meritocracy, not against meritocracy itself. Insofar as meritocracy ends up not only determining the extremes of success but also condemning non-achievers as worthless, that is a corruption of meritocracy, to be condemned alongside better-recognized corruptions such as racism and sexism. This is why I say that Sandel and deBoer have conflated an accidental imperfection of one (punitive) mode of meritocracy with a critique of meritocracy itself.

Of course the ethics of success is full of knotty problems. It is not easy to draw the line between what is given only on the grounds of talent and effort, on the one hand, and what belongs to all, regardless of achievement, on the other. The question "how much is enough for a decent life?" is difficult to answer, and on top of the intrinsic difficulty, the answer shifts over time. Education is, and perhaps will always be, a battleground, and one way to interpret Sandel and deBoer's proposed policy interventions is to see them as disagreeing over where to draw the line in that arena. DeBoer's suggestion that we become willing to exempt some twelve-year-olds from further schooling is a way of drawing the line relatively low—high school is already "extra"—whereas Sandel's suggestion of lottery-based college admissions draws the line high: even college education should not be allocated on the basis of talent, promise, or achievement.

Constructing a non-punitive meritocracy is not at all straightforward—any more than constructing a non-racist or non-sexist meritocracy, or one that is not biased in favor of the rich. But it is a worthy project, because a non-punitive meritocracy holds out the prospect of combining—not merely in words, but in reality—our desire for cooperative communitarian harmony with our commitment to individual excellence and achievement. Sandel and deBoer urge us to sacrifice the latter at the altar of the former. But that wouldn't be necessary if we could achieve both goals. A kinder, more compassionate, more progressive—which is to say, less punitive—meritocracy would give us the best of all worlds.

For both authors the fundamental question is not about how to tinker with our current system at the margins but what kind of ideal we should set our sights on—even if it is not necessarily immediately realizable. DeBoer's book ends with a panegyric description of a post-revolutionary Marxist "utopia" of which he acknowledges: "Some

will, no doubt, call this fantasy. They will say that such a society cannot exist." But this vision is predicated on a mistake: he assumes that we *have* to give up on meritocratic rewards in order to free ourselves from the scourge of meritocratic punishment. I say, as long as we're dreaming, let's dream bigger.

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