

RECENT WORK

Recent Work on Meritocracy

BENJAMIN SACHS-COBBE

1. Introduction

The word ‘meritocracy’ was coined by Michael Young in 1958 in his book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (Young [1958] 2017), and philosophical discussions under that heading have appeared regularly ever since. In the last five years, however, there has been a sudden burst of anti-meritocratic scholarship among western philosophers, including two monographs on the topic, by Michael Sandel and Daniel Markovits respectively, and an article by Elizabeth Anderson.

Why now? To start with, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency have caused left-leaning thinkers to suspect that there is something seriously wrong with the basic institutions of the UK and USA. How could a society that is working reasonably well make people want to vote for someone like Donald Trump, who seems indifferent between remoulding America according to his own vision of the good and just burning the whole thing to the ground? Next comes the diagnosis stage, where these thinkers identify what’s going wrong and why. What’s going wrong, they say, is that there is a growing resentment, on the part of members of the working class and the struggling middle class, towards immigrants, members of racial minority groups, the highly educated and the wealthy. As to the ‘why’ question, the answer is that the institutions that distribute wealth and privilege in the USA and UK are organized meritocratically.

Of course, if those institutions were morally defensible then perhaps Brexit and Trump would merely be problems to be managed. But Sandel, Markovits and Anderson consider those institutions to be unfair in addition to resentment-generating. Focussing on their writings, I begin, in §2, by presenting an overview of the moral case against such institutions as they function in the real world, and in the USA and UK in particular (my focus throughout is the morality of public policy in the American/British context; I am interested in whether these societies morally ought to maintain their meritocratic institutions in light of the objections raised and the economic and psychological constraints they face¹). The next two sections are targeted at clarifying just what aspects, precisely, of social organization in the USA

1 For an examination of the *in-principle* cases for and against meritocracy, see [Sachs-Cobbe and Douglas \(MS\)](#).

and UK Sandel, Markovits and Anderson are objecting to, and why they recommend the changes they do. In §3 I discuss the extent to, which they (or anyone) can object to meritocracy without objecting to capitalism, while in §4 I offer a distinction between objecting to meritocratic institutions and objecting to an ideology that often accompanies them. In §5 I conclude and offer some direction for future work. Throughout I use ‘meritocracy’ as shorthand for ‘intentionally designing institutions in a meritocratic way’.

First, however, I define my subject: an institution is *meritocratic* just in case it rewards merit. As to what merit is, the various meritocratic theories can be sorted under three headings: merit in a given domain is either (i) the possession of a relevant qualification (e.g. a degree in medicine if the domain is the hiring of surgeons), (ii) the prospect of being able to make a relevant contribution (e.g. doing lots of successful surgeries) or (iii) having put forth, or being likely to put forth, effort (e.g. putting in long hours doing surgeries). The recent critiques of meritocracy focus on version 1 – qualification – and so that is the version I will take as definitive of meritocracy here.

Given this definition it is easy to explain the sense in which two pillars of collective life in the USA and UK are meritocratic: (i) The institutions by which work – and, by extension, income – is distributed in these countries are meritocratic because they reward the possession of educational credentials; (ii) institutions of higher education in these countries are meritocratic in that they bestow admission largely based on grades and test scores. Both of these meritocratic pillars have come under attack by the new anti-meritocrats.

Before examining the recent objections to meritocracy, I briefly explain why meritocracy has until lately been so popular. The main reason, I suspect, is that meritocracy seems perfectly designed to appeal to philosophical liberals, where being a ‘philosophical liberal’ means having an outlook on political morality that emphasizes liberty and equality. In a capitalist economy, employers have an incentive to award jobs based on qualifications – in other words, to award jobs meritocratically. Similarly, universities typically need no encouraging to recruit the secondary school students with the best record of academic achievement. Consequently, at least these two pillars of meritocracy require no infringements of liberty; no one has to be forced to uphold them. As to equality, when an institution is meritocratic it is not known in advance which individuals it will reward. Meritocratic institutions are blind to who we are, caring only about what qualifications we bring to the table. In that sense we are all equals in the eyes of meritocratic institutions.

But the obvious Achilles Heel for meritocracy is that its embrace of equality is too superficial. Sure, we’re all equals in the eyes of meritocratic institutions, *until those institutions take a look at our CVs*; after that point, it’s our inequalities in qualifications that matter most. So the egalitarian credentials

of meritocracy, and any politician who supports it, are seen as in need of shoring up. Equality of opportunity, which can be understood as a principle demanding that everyone be given an equal chance to acquire the rewards allocated by the meritocracy (Sachs 2015), is the natural choice.

2. *Objections to meritocracy*

This brings us to the first of the prominent recent objections to meritocracy: equality of opportunity is not instantiated, and if we don't have equality of opportunity then we ought not to have meritocracy either. Markovits (2019: ch. 5) and Sandel (2020: 122–5, ch. 6) muster an awesome array of statistics and case studies to make vivid just how much of an advantage the children of the wealthy in the USA and UK have over middle- and working-class children in the race to acquire the qualifications rewarded by meritocratic institutions.² It all begins with assortative mating, whereby adults tend to procreate within their own social class, thus creating a multiplier effect on interfamily wealth inequality. From that point forward, the initial inequality snowballs. Wealthy mothers are less stressed, which is correlated with high IQ scores in their children, and wealthy couples are more likely to stay married and to be able to take time off of work to spend with their children. Then of course comes schooling: Children of the wealthy go to better schools, and their parents enhance that education by paying for private tutoring and an array of culturally rich extracurricular activities. These investments pay dividends, as shown by how much better wealthy children perform on standardized tests. For instance, as Markovits reports (2019: 132), 'Students from families earning over \$200,000 per year (roughly the top 5%) score 388 points higher [on the SAT] than students from families earning less than \$20,000 per year (roughly the bottom 20%)'. Furthermore, of course, inequalities in educational achievement and extracurricular enrichment lead to striking variation in admission to elite colleges and universities. According to Markovits (2019: 136), 'At the roughly 150 most competitive and selective . . . colleges [in the United States], students from households in the top quarter of the income distribution outweigh students from households in the bottom quarter by a factor of fourteen to one according to one study'. This all comes at a time when having a graduate or professional degree is suddenly much more important to one's career prospects than it used to be, and of course having attended an elite college or university drastically increases one's chance of getting into an elite graduate or professional programme. Frustratingly, then, the educational systems of the USA and UK, which are supposed to be engines of class mobility and distributors of opportunity across the economic spectrum, have become key players in the

2 The rest of this paragraph draws on Markovits 2019.

system by which privilege is transmitted from generation to generation. And, of course, when privilege is transmitted it accumulates, leading to gaping wealth inequalities. Furthermore, the lack of social mobility contributes to an epidemic of malaise and hopelessness among those stuck at lower rungs of the economic ladder.

So much for the first objection to meritocracy. Whereas that objection focuses on how the social lottery (to use Rawls's expression) exercises an out-sized effect on individuals' chances of acquiring the qualifications rewarded by the meritocracy, the second objection focuses on a different source of moral arbitrariness: markets. Which qualifications are rewarded by the meritocracy depends in large part on one key matter: which goods and services are in high demand on the market. But this too, so the anti-meritocrats argue, is arbitrary from a moral point of view, for two reasons.

First, if a certain qualification is rewarded on the market, this means nothing more than that people are willing to pay for one to do the things that the qualification indicates an ability to do, which itself entails nothing more than that they have a desire that one do those things. But this is a pure matter of chance; people's desires are what they are for a variety of reasons, most of them having no relation to matters of ethics. During the Renaissance people admired the ability to paint a fresco; nowadays we are enthusiastic about the ability to shoot a basketball through a hoop. The explanation as to why elite basketball players have their talents rewarded so much more richly on the market these days than do elite fresco-painters goes no deeper than this; it has nothing ethical to recommend it. True, basketball players satisfy more desires through their exploits than do fresco painters nowadays, but as the economist Frank Knight noted 100 years ago, we generally think that satisfying desires has value only if the desires themselves, or the ends at which they're directed, have value. Yet the market makes no moral distinctions among desires. This first source of the moral arbitrariness of markets is explained well by [Sandel \(2020: 122–3, 126–8, 137–40\)](#) and [Appiah \(2018\)](#).

Suppose, however, that this intuitive thought is mistaken – that the value of satisfying a desire does not depend on the content of that desire. Even so, an anti-meritocrat might argue that its moral value depends on the *origin* of the desire. If this is conceded then the anti-meritocrat can argue that which qualifications are rewarded on the market is often arbitrary for a second reason, namely that sometimes the desires for them are created by those who have the supply.

Markovits is making a variant of this point when he claims that American workers with elite academic credentials have manufactured a desire among managers to hire them (this would be an instance of what John Kenneth Galbraith, in *The Affluent Society* ([Galbraith 1998: ch. 11](#)), calls the 'dependence effect'). Unfortunately, it's difficult to discern exactly what he means by this claim in the two chapters of his book in which he presses it (2019: chs. 8–9). Furthermore, at least in theory the discipline of the market should

force managers to hire only those people who genuinely add value: any firm carrying the dead weight of highly qualified employees who don't contribute anything should, in theory, get out-competed by more streamlined firms in the same market sector.

Fortunately, roughly this same charge is levelled much more clearly by Graeber (2018: ch. 5) and James Suzman (2020: ch. 14). The key insight is that the practice of hiring and retaining white-collar workers who contribute nothing persists in the USA and UK because of how widespread it is. If all firms offering the same good or service are equally undisciplined then the market can bear them all as long as they can each make good the loss of paying salaries to people who contribute nothing. As to how they can pull off *that* feat, Graeber and Suzman say that they can do it because of the extremely high productivity of the workers at the bottom of the firm's hierarchy: the ones who actually make the goods and deliver the services that are the firm's *raison d'être*. Their productivity creates a surplus, and instead of it being distributed out to the productive workers themselves in the form of higher wages or shorter working hours without a reduction in pay, or to consumers in the form of lower prices, it gets sucked upward into the managerial hierarchy. Of course, this explanation covers only the question of why those at the top of the hierarchy *can* retain employees who contribute nothing. As to why they *want* to do it, and why there is very little by way of protest at their doing it, Graeber (2018: chs. 5–6) and Suzman (2020: chs. 13–14) have plenty to say, but space considerations prevent my going into that here.

In summary, the second objection to meritocracy is that no privileged moral status attaches to the job market as we currently find it in the USA and UK, because which qualifications are in demand, and which are not, is, from the perspective of any jobseeker, a matter of luck or (worse) connivance.

This objection is similar in a morally important way to the first: they both bottom out at the idea that meritocracy does not naturally lead to a job market that is fair or morally privileged in any sense. Or, to put it differently, in a meritocratic world, we don't have anything to say to those who complain that employers don't want what they're offering, by way of justifying their lot in life.

Given that the second objection relies on the same underlying moral thought as the first, the question arises whether the natural response to that objection is the same as with the first. And, indeed, I think this is the case. A defender of meritocracy will argue that if fair equality of opportunity were instantiated in the USA and UK then it wouldn't matter, morally speaking, that the contours of the job markets in those countries are arbitrary from a moral point of view, as everyone would have a fair chance to engage in the activities to which the most generous awards (arbitrarily) attach. Unfortunately, as Rawls (1999: 448) pointed out, on a practical level achieving fair equality of opportunity would require abolishing the family, and on a theoretical level

it would require disentangling what is not properly distinct: one's biological and social endowment from one's effort. None of this is going to happen.

Thus far this section has distilled two of the recent objections to meritocracy, both of which aim, by revealing how and why some thrive and others struggle within meritocracies, to undermine our natural tendency to think that there is something morally good about how meritocratic institutions tend to reward highly qualified people.

In what remains of this section, I will restate the third objection to meritocracy, which I previewed in the first section. It begins by noting the trend of rising economic inequality since the 1970s in the USA and UK, and lays the blame for this at the feet of meritocracy. As a matter of definition, meritocratic institutions steer greater wealth to those with more qualifications. So there is no question that meritocracy must produce some degree of economic inequality. [Markovits \(2019\)](#), however, claims that *extreme* inequality is, likewise, part of the inner logic of meritocracy. The logical endpoint, he claims, of aligning wealth with qualifications is distributing *ever more* wealth to *ever fewer* people, as long as we can identify *ever finer* gradations in levels of qualification (which we can). Hence the hollowing out of the middle class and the ever-increasing proportion of total wealth held by the most wealthy 1%, and especially 0.1%, of the populations of these countries.

This inequality, according to [Sandel \(2020: 143–54\)](#) and [Appiah \(2018\)](#), gives rise to resentment in those left behind, partly as a result of giving rise to hubris in the wealthy. Sandel speaks at length about the 'patronizing' attitude of the wealthy towards those who are in the working class or struggling to stay in the middle class, and cites the victory of Trump over Hilary Clinton as evidence that the latter feel aggrieved at the former, noting that Trump's 2016 presidential campaign was chock full of disparaging rhetoric about the 'elites'.

If this sounds like armchair social science, that's because it is – and this is true of both Sandel and Appiah, though Sandel does cite a paper confirming a set of widespread condescending attitudes that the more educated have towards the less educated ([Sandel 2020: 95–6](#)). Still, Sandel and Appiah might argue that some social trends are so blatant that it's reasonable to affirm their reality before waiting for the evidence to come in. Anyway, I will return, in §4, to the question of whether meritocracy is the cause of these trends and whether we could have meritocracy while avoiding them.

3. *Are there alternatives to meritocracy?*

In the previous section I laid out three prominent objections to meritocracy as it is manifested in the USA and UK. First, meritocracy can be criticized for how it favours some people over others – specifically, that it favours people who were born into wealth or in other fortunate kinds of circumstance. Second, meritocracy can be criticized for the qualifications it rewards, since

it results in people being paid handsomely regardless of whether their labour is of social value. Third, meritocracy engenders extreme inequality, and with it intrinsically problematic and socially destructive attitudes, namely hubris in the wealthy and resentment in everyone else.

In this section I discuss the question whether there is an alternative to meritocracy – another system by which the rewards attached to higher education and work could be distributed.

Judging just by the titles of their works – *The Meritocracy Trap*, *The Tyranny of Merit*, and ‘The Broken System: What Comes after Meritocracy?’ – you would assume that Markovits, Sandel and Anderson are rejecting meritocracy and offering an alternative in its place. And we can assume that if one of these theorists were going to advocate an alternative system, they would go to the trouble to assign it a name. Reading their work, one encounters only two expressions that seem to denote an alternative system: Sandel’s ‘equality of condition’ and Anderson’s ‘democratic equality’.

Sandel defines equality of condition (Sandel 2020: 224) as that system that:

enables those who do not achieve great wealth or prestigious positions to live lives of decency and dignity – developing and exercising their abilities in work that wins social esteem, sharing in a widely diffused culture of learning, and deliberating with their fellow citizens about public affairs.

It is not clear, however, whether this is an alternative to meritocracy. Allocating jobs and college/university admission on the basis of qualifications seems, at least in the abstract, to be compatible with everything that appears in the definition of equality of condition. If anything, Sandel seems to propose that equality of condition should sit *alongside* meritocracy, albeit a form of meritocracy that is more justifiable because it is accompanied by equality of opportunity (Sandel 2020: 224).

As to how we can ensure that everyone is able to develop and exercise their abilities in a way that earns social esteem, Sandel’s most concrete proposals concern tax policy – proposals to which I’ll return in a moment.

Meanwhile, Anderson (2021) cashes out the notion of democratic equality in terms of a working-class empowerment agenda, which includes strengthening trade unions, promoting worker representation on corporate boards, and mandating more family-friendly leave policies. Again, though, we’re not being shown an alternative way of allocating jobs and admission.

What Sandel and Anderson are each proposing are ways to moderate meritocracy’s harmful effects on society. Nor does Markovits propose anything more radical. The proposals for reform that these three thinkers put forward can be sorted into two broad categories: we can make our

institutions less meritocratic or we can make it matter less that they're meritocratic.

Making our institutions less meritocratic

- **We can broaden access to high-quality higher education.** Markovits, focusing on the USA, laments how the most elite universities operate as private clubs that are realistically accessible only to children of the wealthy. The way to fix this, he proposes, is to eliminate the tax-exempt status of private colleges and universities and to encourage elite institutions (through public subsidies) to expand their enrolment (Markovits 2019: 277) (we can infer from this what side he would take on the hot-button issue in the UK of the continuing tax-exempt status of independent primary and secondary schools). Sandel, meanwhile, suggests that elite universities should take the applications of all qualified applicants and use a lottery to choose which ones are offered admission (Sandel 2020: 184–8). Affirmative action in admissions is another obvious suggestion.³
- **We can create a situation in which more non-market goods are distributed non-meritocratically.** Appiah (2018) and Sandel (2020) both gesture at this solution, but it receives its fullest elaboration in Fishkin's *Bottlenecks* (2014). While meritocratic institutions exert a great deal of control over the distribution of admission, jobs, income and, by extension, all market goods, there are other goods for which there is no good reason that they should be distributed meritocratically. These include, arguably, political power and influence, social esteem (which profoundly affects the distribution of self-esteem), the opportunity to exercise one's talents and (relatedly) the opportunity to contribute to the social good.

Making it matter less that our institutions are meritocratic

- **We can take some market goods off the market.** The USA and UK could take more goods into public ownership. And as to those goods that remain privately held, they could make more of them a matter of entitlement instead of allowing the market to distribute them to the highest bidder. That way, although income would still be distributed in the same old meritocratic way, the less wealthy would retain access to more of the most important goods. This idea is popular among a

3 Admittedly, the line between making elite education less meritocratic and ensuring equality of opportunity in the context of a fully meritocratic educational system is a difficult one to draw. It may be a matter of semantics.

wide swathe of philosophers, including those most receptive to the idea that there is a proper place for the rewarding of merit, including [Miller \(1999\)](#) and [Walzer \(1983\)](#).

- **We can improve the situation of workers who don't have elite qualifications.** Several thinkers have spoken recently of a bifurcation in the USA and UK job markets. Markovits speaks of 'gloomy and glossy jobs' ([Markovits 2019](#): ch. 6, 279–83), while [Graeber \(2018\)](#) and [Anderson \(2021\)](#) each speak of 'shit' jobs and, by extension, non-shit jobs. Roughly, the bifurcation is between jobs that feature high pay and good working conditions – including, especially, a degree of autonomy and respectful treatment by one's managers – and jobs that don't. Highly qualified workers get the glossy/non-shit jobs or are self-employed, while the rest are doomed to the drudgery of a gloomy/shit job. Obviously, some of Anderson's suggestions, including strengthening trade unions and increasing worker membership on corporate boards, are aimed at helping to improve the pay and conditions of those in the latter category. The same is true of [Sandel's \(2020: 224–31\)](#) proposal to reduce income tax and [Markovits's \(2019: 281–4\)](#) proposal to make the American payroll tax less regressive. Markovits argues as well that changing the payroll tax in this way would encourage the creation of additional glossy jobs. He also advances the idea of offering wage subsidies to employers who create jobs of this sort.⁴

When we look closely then, we find that recent philosophical work on meritocracy doesn't feature anyone advocating that we dismantle the institutions that reward qualifications. What we see, instead, are proposals for reform, all of which are variations on a single theme, namely lowering the stakes.⁵ The idea is that meritocratic institutions should persist but control fewer aspects of the course of our lives. Doing so should go a fair way towards breaking the connection between meritocracy and rising inequality, thus blunting some of the force of the third objection to meritocracy laid out in §2.

Why, then, are these critics of meritocracy not offering an alternative to meritocracy? One hypothesis worth considering is that it's because they endorse capitalism. To explain: In a market economy, all else being equal, an employer, when going through a hiring process, has an incentive to make a

4 In this paragraph I've oversimplified Graeber's taxonomy of jobs, as he famously proposes that there is a category of 'bullshit' jobs that sits alongside shit jobs and good jobs. For the purpose of this paragraph, though, bullshit jobs can be lumped in with glossy/non-shit jobs, as people holding such jobs are not among those who Sandel and Markovits anticipate benefiting from their proposals.

5 I borrow this 'lowering the stakes' framing from Lesley Jacobs. See especially [Jacobs 2004](#).

more generous offer in proportion to the qualifications of the applicant in question, where a ‘qualification’ is a characteristic that suggests an ability to make more productive use of whatever capital – machines, data, scientific instruments, for example – the employer can put at her disposal. We might say, then, that capitalism has a meritocratic inner logic in the domain of jobs.

One could point out, though, that the USA and UK didn’t become recognizably meritocratic with the advent of capitalism. This is true. As [Markovits \(2019: ch. 4\)](#) points out, it was actually industrialization that ushered in meritocracy. Before industrialization there was a very common way of becoming and remaining wealthy without acquiring qualifications: being a landowner. Wealthy landowners refused – indeed, prided themselves on refusing – to deploy their capital in highly productive ways. The incentive to do so was there, but their sense of collective identity and favoured theory of a life well lived (with its emphasis on leisure) were strong enough motivators to overcome that incentive. But industrialization was the beginning of the end for the landed aristocracy; eventually they could resist the logic of meritocracy no longer.⁶

This is not to say that economic forces do all the explaining here. These forces certainly push us as a society towards a certain way of distributing jobs and admission, but it is up to us whether to be passively carried along or instead to resist. So the stories we tell ourselves – stories about the importance of money, about what it means to work, to be productive, to be skilled, to be deserving etc. – matter quite a lot (and I will take a closer look at them in the next section). As [Sandel \(2020: ch. 2\)](#) ably shows, religion, and specifically the widespread acceptance of the Protestant work ethic, constitutes an important part of the social fabric in the USA and UK that ushered in meritocracy, and continues to insulate it from criticism. In fact, it’s hard to explain how the Industrial Revolution was able to take off without invoking the Protestant work ethic, as do [Graeber \(2018: 222–44\)](#) and [Kathi Weeks \(2011: ch. 1\)](#), drawing on Max Weber.

In any event, if not capitalism then certainly *industrial and post-industrial capitalism* naturally tends towards meritocracy. Even more so *globalized industrial and post-industrial capitalism*. In a capitalist context, industrialization + globalization = meritocracy on steroids. Consider the story of piano manufacturing, as Robert Frank tells it. In the old days, if you wanted a piano you had to buy one from your nearest piano maker. Nowadays, with worldwide marketing and drastically reduced shipping costs, you can settle for nothing less than the best, and as a result only a handful of piano manufacturers worldwide remain. In other words, just a few of the *most qualified* worldwide are scooping up all the wealth getting ploughed into pianos. That same story can be retold with respect to many kinds of skilled work ([Frank 2016: ch. 3](#)).

6 The best account, of which I am aware, of the pre-industrial landed aristocracy and how it was supplanted by the meritocracy is [Woolridge 2021](#).

I have been exploring the hypothesis that if you endorse capitalism then you're more or less committed to a system in which highly qualified workers earn a great deal more income than do less qualified workers. This argument concerns only meritocracy in jobs and income, thus raising the question of whether capitalism tends towards meritocracy in education as well. Here the story is the same, albeit more convoluted. It's not that prestigious colleges and universities are *forced* to fight among themselves for the most qualified students. But they have a strong motive to do so anyway. By the time students in a capitalist society finish their secondary schooling there is already a divide between the elite core who are likely to obtain the qualifications that attract high wages, and the rest. This is down to, as [Markovits \(2019: ch. 5\)](#) puts it, the 'meritocratic inheritance' that parents bestow on their children. If elite universities choose not to compete for these students, they won't remain elite for long.

4. *The descriptive and normative senses of 'meritocracy'*

From among Sandel, Anderson and Markovits, not one of them proposes an alternative to meritocracy, as I showed in the previous section. That being the case, why does each of these three philosophers present him/herself as an anti-meritocrat? One simple possibility is that, although these three aren't anti-meritocratic in the sense of 'meritocratic' defined above, they are anti-meritocratic in some other sense.⁷

To pursue this line of thought, let's distinguish two senses of 'meritocratic', as [Appiah \(2018\)](#) gestures at doing. 'Meritocratic' in the descriptive sense applies to institutions; it identifies how they distribute their rewards. My definition of 'meritocratic' was descriptive. 'Meritocratic' in the normative sense picks out an ideology – an ideology that offers one particular justification for having institutions that are meritocratic in the descriptive sense.

According to this ideology, those institutions reward something pre-institutional – call it 'merit' – such that it is morally good to put in place institutions that reward that thing. To bring out what is interesting about this ideology, it would be helpful to describe, briefly, its main competitor. This alternative defines merit as whatever qualifications are rewarded by our educational and market institutions; in other words, it defines 'merit' as institutional. And it denies that there is anything non-instrumentally morally

7 It's worth noting that not one of these philosophers tells us what his/her definition of 'meritocracy', or any nearby word such as 'meritocratic' or 'meritocrat', is. They each make many claims about 'meritocracy', but don't tell the reader which of those claims are supposed to be true as a matter of definition and which true as a matter of substance. Sometimes it seems as though they're simply identifying all the bad outcomes that the American and British publics have failed to avert in virtue of not (yet) having enacted any of their recommended reforms, and slapping the 'meritocracy' label on the quite diverse array of policies, norms, practices and human foibles that have caused those outcomes.

good about the fact that our job-related and educational institutions bestow greater rewards on those who possess merit so defined. It instead looks to whether there is an extrinsic justification for setting up those institutions that way – say, for instance, that we all wind up better off in virtue of the most qualified people having this incentive to apply their skills and knowledge.

The ideology under which merit is pre-institutional is challenged by the facts laid out in §2: that our meritocratic institutions reward being born into a high social position and into the right sort of market – a market in which there is a high demand for one’s qualifications. This ideology is challenged, in addition, by the presence of inequalities in luck. Consider the following anecdote (Frank 2016: 38):

In [ice] hockey . . . roughly 40% of all players in the premier professional leagues around the world were born in January, February or March. . . . The apparent reason for this skewed distribution is that January 1 is the traditional cut-off birthdate for participation in youth hockey leagues. Players born earlier in the year were thus oldest members of their team at each successive stage. On average, they were slightly bigger, stronger, faster and more experienced than their teammates born in later months. Because they were more likely to excel at each stage, they were . . . more likely to be funnelled into the programs with the best facilities and the best coaching, more likely to receive athletic scholarships, and so on.

Similarly enormous opportunity effects, similarly caused by timing-of-birth, are seen in the fact that the number of CEOs of large American companies born in June and July ‘is almost one-third lower than would be expected on the basis of chance’ (Frank 2016:38).

If being a meritocrat is, by definition, embracing this ideology, then at least two of the recent authors under discussion here – namely, Appiah and Sandel – are undoubtedly anti-meritocrats. Indeed, as Miller points out (1999: 131), anti-meritocracy in this sense is common to Rawls, one of the standard-bearers of the left, and Hayek, one of the standard-bearers of the right. Few contemporary philosophers are willing to endorse meritocracy in this sense (Miller is one of them).

Supposing we were persuaded by the various arguments against meritocracy in the normative sense, an obvious further question would be how to combat its popularity. Helpfully, we can extract three guidelines from Appiah’s and Sandel’s writings:

- **Stop speaking the language of desert** (Appiah 2018). We should stop saying, of those who are favoured by our meritocratic institutions, that they ‘deserve’ their resulting rewards. And of course we should stop saying that everyone else ‘deserves’ their lack of rewards.
- **Stop promoting the myth of social mobility** (Sandel 2020: ch. 3). Our habit of speaking of the USA and the UK as countries in which there

is high social mobility/equality of opportunity or, more colloquially, ones in which each person is limited only by their drive and ambition, suggests that everyone has a reasonable chance of acquiring the qualifications necessary for success in the meritocracy. So we can help to undermine meritocracy in the normative sense by getting our facts straight and speaking accordingly.

- **Stop valorizing ‘skilled labour’ over ‘unskilled labour’** (Sandel 2020: ch. 7). It’s all too easy to get carried away by the thought that, contrary to the claims explored in §2, there is a correlation between how much one can be paid to do a certain kind of labour and how morally valuable that labour is. Since (what we usually refer to as) ‘skilled labour’ is generally paid better than (what we usually refer to as) ‘unskilled labour’, we can fall into the trap of thinking that those who perform the former are (all else being equal) morally superior to the those who perform the latter (we might hope that the COVID-related lockdowns of 2020–21 have already partially undermined this way of thinking, since for the purposes of those lockdowns we had to decide who society’s ‘essential’/‘key’ workers were, and we found of course that the great bulk of them perform unskilled labour.) Sandel argues that this tendency in American and British thought, and its effect on social discourse, looks to the working class like smugness on the part of the professional class and gives rise to resentment in the members of that former class.

So there is something Appiah, Sandel and anyone else who rejects meritocracy in the normative sense can do to combat its popularity, but at the same time the tools at their disposal are limited. They can speak the truth as they see it and call out untruths when they hear them spoken, but of course they cannot force anyone to believe as they believe and speak as they speak.

Furthermore, in fighting this fight they are, arguably, pushing against the grain of human psychology in at least two ways.

First, one of the reasons it can be difficult to dislodge moral ideologies that purport to justify the status quo is that, as Marx pointed out, humans have a tendency towards false consciousness: we feel strongly compelled to tell ourselves stories on which our position in the world is justified. Sandel (2020: ch. 2, 78–80) identifies a number of ways in which US and UK public discourse is shot through with stories that purport to justify the drastic economic inequality that the meritocracy leaves in its wake (prominent among these is a longstanding tradition of Biblical interpretation on which those who prosper do so because they have done better than others at obeying God’s commandments). Those who prosper accept these stories to assuage their guilt, and those who don’t prosper accept these stories because the alternative is anger and indignance.

The second reason that it can be difficult to dislodge moral ideologies that purport to justify the status quo is that we have a natural tendency towards an illusion of control – that is, towards thinking that what happens to us is more a result of our choices, and less a result of luck, than it really is. Frank (2016: ch. 5) goes into illuminating detail about this.⁸ He shows that this illusion is partly a side-effect of psychological biases that have nothing to do with control. One of them is the availability heuristic, which refers to our tendency to explain events by reference to information that's (comparatively) easier to remember. Well, it's easy to remember all the effort one put in to achieving X – after all, it required planning, patience, and perseverance – but not so easy to bring to mind all the subtle turns of luck that helped one to achieve X. At the same time, arguably part of the reason that the tendency to see oneself as in control of one's fate, and to discount the influence of luck, is so engrained in human psychology is that it is evolutionarily adaptive. Better to assume you can do something about the predator approaching and at least try to do it (outrun it, for instance) than to just throw up your hands and curse your rotten luck.

5. *Directions for future work*

We may not be able to stamp out the ideology that conceives of merit as pre-institutional and valorizes the rewarding of it, but the case against that ideology, as laid out by Frank and others, is strong. Consequently, I suggest that future philosophical work in this area ought to take for granted that the stronger argument for meritocracy is the institutional one. Such work might take the reform proposals put forward by Sandel, Markovits and Anderson as a starting point. We need to know whether we should cushion against the most objectionable effects of meritocracy in the way those theorists suggest, with the worry being that in doing so we would also blunt the *good* effects of meritocracy (taking as given, now, that the main case for meritocracy is institutional and therefore focussed on meritocracy's real-world benefits). Take, for instance, Anderson's proposals for strengthening labour unions. Supposing that stronger labour unions inhibit economic productivity to some extent, the question would be whether the moral importance of strengthening labour unions overrides the moral importance of extra economic productivity and all that it yields, such as an enhanced ability to fund a strong social safety net. This will be difficult philosophical spadework, as it will require mastering a complex and controversial set of economic facts and

⁸ He also shows that there are techniques for overcoming these tendencies (Frank 2016: ch. 6).

determining their relevance to matters of principle, but the promised payoff seems worth the effort.⁹

University of St. Andrews
UK
bas7@st-andrews.ac.uk

References

- Anderson, E. 2021. The broken system: what comes after meritocracy? *The Nation*, February 23, 2021. <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/sandel-tyranny-merit/>.
- Appiah, K. A. 2018. The myth of meritocracy: who really gets what they deserve? *The Guardian*, October 19, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/oct/19/the-myth-of-meritocracy-who-really-gets-what-they-deserve>.
- Fishkin, J. 2014. *Bottlenecks: a New Theory of Equal Opportunity*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Frank, R. H. 2016. *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Galbraith, J. K. 1998. *The Affluent Society*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Graeber, D. 2018. *Bullshit Jobs: the Rise of Pointless Work and What We Can Do About It*. London: Penguin Random House UK.
- Jacobs, L. 2004. *Pursuing Equal Opportunities: the Theory and Practice of Egalitarian Justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Markovits, D. 2019. *The Meritocracy Trap*. London: Penguin Books.
- Miller, D. 1999. *Principles of Social Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, J. 1999. *A Theory of Justice*. Rev. edn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sachs, B. 2015. Fair equality of opportunity in our actual world. *Theory and Research in Education* 14: 277–94.
- Sachs-Cobbe, B. and A. X. Douglas. n.d. Meritocracy in the political and economic spheres. Unpublished manuscript.
- Sandel, M. J. 2020. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* London: Allen Lane.
- Suzman, J. 2020. *Work: A History of How We Spend Our Time*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Walzer, M. 1983. *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Weeks, K. 2011. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Woolridge, A. 2021. *The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World*. London: Penguin Random House UK.
- Young, M. (1958) 2017. *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

⁹ I wish to thank Alex Douglas for tons of thought-provoking conversation over the course of my time writing this article, and for commenting on an earlier draft.