

The Tyranny of Merit by Michael Sandel

America is said to be the land of opportunity, where any person can rise to be president no matter where in the USA or what background they come from. In *The Tyranny of Merit* Michael Sandel says, in effect, fat chance! Wealth and privilege tip the scales. Much of the book is explaining how the best jobs go to the children of the rich and privileged, particularly in the US but also in the UK and Europe. As an academic at Harvard, he sees the admission process first hand and, despite affirmative action, the rich and privileged largely succeed. Not that they don't have to be determined and diligent too, but it is mainly they who get the chance to compete. Those who get good degrees from Ivy League Universities get the best jobs and so, when they have children, the system perpetuates itself. So far we've been doing sociology not philosophy, so I hope you can accept this account without too much argument and instead we'll consider meritocracy itself more philosophically.

President Reagan, addressing a meeting of black Americans, said "all Americans have the right to be judged on the sole basis of individual merit and to go just as far as their dreams and hard work will take them." This sentiment has been repeated by subsequent Presidents and has not been questioned by politicians since. It has bolstered the belief that those who succeed deserve to do so, deserve the rewards that go with success and that those rewards should not be limited, e.g., by high taxation. In some circles it is even considered one's *duty* to succeed as far as one is able.

The case for meritocracy seems obvious. If I need a plumber or a lawyer, I want the best I can get. Tradesmen and professionals strive to learn, improve themselves and gain credentials to demonstrate their skills. They can then win the best and most lucrative work. Furthermore, we as customers gain as we can employ better tradesmen and professionals. This, in a nutshell, is the case for meritocracy.

Now imagine we have a *true* meritocracy (setting aside the difficulties in attaining this), those succeeding will have ample rewards and will pride themselves in knowing that they deserve them. What of those at the bottom of the success ladder (and I am assuming special provision is made for those who through sickness or disability etc. cannot succeed)? They will suffer poverty with, not only the deprivations that that confers, but also with the humiliation of knowing it is their fault. Furthermore, those less successful who need, say, lawyers or plumbers can't afford the good ones but have to settle for second best, or perhaps have to manage without.

Let's try a somewhat different thought-experiment. Sandel, as we have seen, asserts that meritocracy is skewed by wealth, privilege, and influence, but if we found a way to nullify the effects of these, how meritocratic would society be? Everyone would rely on their natural talents alongside diligence, hard work, and concentration. No prizes are given for effort alone. Usain Bolt acknowledged that his training partner, Yohan Blake (a talented sprinter too), worked harder than he did, but we all know who won the glittering medals. The same is true in all walks of life. Disney's implied assertion, that if you want something enough you can get it, is a myth. You need aptitude as well as desire. And how does talent come about? – through the genetic lottery. It's a good job I didn't yearn to be a ballet dancer as I would never have succeeded however hard I tried. No doubt you can improve your talent with hard work, but there has to be some ability there in the first place.

And can we be sure that the capacity for hard work is granted to each of us in equal measure? Is this not part of the genetic lottery too?

What responses have there been to these considerations?

Friedrich Hayek, dear to Thatcherism, stepped into this debate, saying that those who succeed are those who provide what is in most demand, what consumers are prepared to pay for. The only merit involved is assessing the market. The best footballers command huge rewards, the best tiddlywinks players do not though the skill may be equivalent. Hayek does not advocate trying to level the playing field, a project he thinks doomed to failure and which would require unacceptable levels of state intervention, severely restricting freedom. Never mind merit, the market will sort out winners and losers.

This is, of course, not a good means of providing what we need most. What we value and what we have spare cash for are not the same thing. Also, the skills that are rewarded are contingent on time and place. Would footballers have been as well rewarded in the Middle Ages? Are jousting sought after now? Could you make a living as a golf player in Papua New Guinea? Whether your skills match the economic conditions of the time and place you occupy is as arbitrary in acquiring merit as, say, inheriting wealth.

John Rawls also rejects merit as a principle of justice. He, too, is concerned to allow us the freedom to live the life we choose. He recognises that success is not entirely due to one's own efforts but rather than handicapping the front runners, to prevent them being successful, he believes they should share their rewards with those less successful. Although he disagrees with Hayek about how goods should be distributed he agrees that it should not be on virtue or merit. In a pluralist society we do not agree on what constitutes virtue or merit because we do not choose to live the same lives. The alternative would be to impose a set of values on those who don't hold them.

What does Sandel propose? He thinks that there should be no impediment to people's progress or success such as those caused by race or class, but that is not enough. It is also important that those who don't succeed are allowed to live in dignity and can feel part of the community, gaining from and contributing to it. If they do not there will be a rise in populist ideas where people reject globalisation etc., where workers lose jobs and the income and dignity the jobs confer, while seeing the rich and successful benefit. This is a theme throughout the book which was written in the Trump administration. He also mentions Brexit in the same context of winners and losers. What he doesn't explain in detail, at least here, how his project is to be accomplished.

I don't pretend this is an exhaustive review of *The Tyranny of Merit*. I have left out a lot, for example, the religious circumstances in which the concept of meritocracy arose, but I think there is plenty here for us to discuss.