

*Psychology at the Cutting Edge: An invited article*

# Ethics and Psychology: The Meritocracy Thesis

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If we take for granted as common knowledge that a just and well-ordered society is impossible, then the quality and tone of those discussions will reflect that knowledge. (John Rawls, speaking to Joshua Cohen, 1995)

Moral philosophy and psychology suffer if pursued in isolation from one another. I read brain physiology when I try to clarify the concept of free will, Jensen missed the implications of his work for blacks because he misunderstood the fact/value dichotomy, and every utopia makes assumptions about "human nature". Perhaps the best way to demonstrate interdependence is to choose an example from moral debate. What with the sound and fury of race, critics of the Bell Curve (1994) ignored its main challenge, perhaps because it was too hope-destructive to face. I refer to the meritocracy thesis. That thesis does nothing less than contend that humane-egalitarian ideals self-destruct in practice.

## Abandon all hope

The meritocracy thesis: (1) Assume we make progress toward the equalization of environments -- to the degree that occurs, all remaining talent differences between people will be due to differences in genes for talent; (2) Assume we make progress toward abolition of privilege -- to the degree that occurs, there will be a social mobility that brings all of the good genes to the top and allows all bad genes to sink to the bottom; (3) Therefore, the upper classes will become a genetic elite whose children inherit their status because of superior merit, while the lower classes become

a self-perpetuating genetic dump, too stupid to be of use in the modern world, an underclass underemployed, criminal, and prone to drugs and illegitimacy.

In fact, the trends so confidently predicted do not seem to be occurring. In America, Flynn (2000) found that the historic value (from 1932 on) for the mean IQ of the children of the lower third of parents (on the occupational hierarchy) has remained stable at 95. Strenze (2007) summarizes four recent studies. He also observes that America seems static and if anything, the association between IQ and occupational status in England has been declining.

But there is cold comfort in this. The rebuttal will be that this just shows how little the liberal left has done to equalize environments. We would have to pray for eternal failure: every success would be a step along a road, not toward a society we admire, but toward one we would loathe. Whatever ideal the thousands that laid down their lives for social reform or the defense of the republic may have had, it was not this: a class system frozen into a caste system by genes for merit highly correlated with social status.

## The degeneration of the school race

The meritocracy model is under-identified, that is, it is not grounded in

a real-world scenario. To rank everyone by genes for talent, a competition must be such that all actors are motivated to the maximum degree and compete on an equal footing

Imagine a boarding school at which all cash must be earned by how well you do in the annual cross-country race. Everyone gets an equal chance; all are provided with the same excellent coaching, health care, diet, and so forth. But the stakes are high: if you win, you get cash enough to meet all your needs with ample pocket money left over. If you are last, you starve unless your classmates are willing to sustain you by private charity.

I have little doubt that all would train and try for the annual race to their utmost and that the results would rank everyone pretty well for their genes for distance running ability. However, note why its draconian sanctions are necessary. The system creates enormous tension between what society forces you to do and what you ideally want to do. Those who prefer chess, or the literary magazine, or even other sports, will have to sacrifice these to hours and hours of training for something many of them loathe. The school is really a bastard meritocracy because of all the human excellences it sacrifices on the altar of its competitive ideal.

Let us chip away at the sanctions a bit. The stakes of the race are altered so that everyone gets the quality of environment from year to year needed

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to maximize performance. After all, should the bad performance of a single year doom you to failure the following year? So now we have a welfare state that gives everyone the coaching, food, lodging, medical care, they need to compete on an equal footing. All that is now at stake is whether you get ample or no pocket money. Even this might be enough to sustain near maximum training and effort. But now assume you can get some, though much less, pocket money by excelling in other activities more to the taste of many: chess, algebra, the school paper, the poetry society, shop, other sports. Few will now do the full Lydiard schedule of running 100 miles per week.

Moreover, every individual who does not lowers the quality of performance needed to equal the average time in the race. And when that happens, some will find they can do pretty well by training only a few miles a week, which will further lower the average performance, which will further lower the training you need to do to be average, in a downward spiral. The school race has degenerated in the sense that it no longer ranks people very well even for genes for running ability.

### Some lessons

(1) Competition for money must include a robust welfare state or it is not fair; (2) Money rewards create a tension between what society wants and what I want to do to realize my own chosen excellence; (3) Unless the penalties for not acceding to what society wants are draconian (and they cannot be if the competition is to be fair), it will fall short of a even a bastard meritocracy. It will not achieve a perfect ranking of genes even for the talents it rewards. The less draconian the penalties, the more sane people will be inclined to pursue other talents and build a true meritocracy.

### Keeping the competition fair

A robust welfare state is not a gratuitous boon but the very soul of any meritocracy. If environments are to be even roughly equal, the sins of the parent must not blight the lives of the children, which means that the lack of merit of the former must be ignored to the degree that is necessary to provide every child

with a non-demoralized home, good diet, good health, good education. The notion that a meritocracy of any sort could lead to an underclass is absurd, unless the "meritocracy" is to be a shooting star that persists for one generation.

### The existential tension

How a people deal with the tension created by the mismatch between what others are willing to pay you to do and what would realize your own unique potential is the measure of the worth of their society. Aristotle compared Athens and Carthage, partially no doubt as ideal types. Athens was a true polis with a cherished way of life, rich in its variety of amusements, ceremony, sport, philosophy, art, theater, and truth seeking, united by the kind of fellow feeling so that any citizen's inability to participate in that way of life was an affront to all. Many tried to walk their own path despite a mismatch between that and what the market rewarded (Socrates for one).

Carthage was a commercial society (Kipling called it a sort of God-forsaken African Manchester) where the mismatch was minimized by money love. People were socialized not to want to do anything that the market did not reward. They enjoyed the art, theatre, and so forth that they did not produce by being mere spectators, or consumers who bought it as a product. Their social glue was so weak that their navy once went on strike for higher wages when faced by an enemy fleet bent on invasion. Like all money and status obsessed peoples, the successful were not much interested in having money taken out of their pockets so the children of the less successful could enjoy justice as fairness or equalized environments. When an underclass threatened to develop, they sent them off as a colonizing expedition.

One of the oddest features of the meritocracy of the Bell Curve is this: it assumes people so dedicated to the school race (maximization of market rewards) that the race ranks them by genes for talent. Yet they are so non-materialistic that they are willing to see huge transfer payment to the disadvantaged so as to equalize environments. A people both money drunk and justice drunk is rare.

The degree to which people will settle for Carthage rather than Athens will fluctuate with their psychology and the economy. If most people live in poverty, they will readily compromise what they really want to do. They will also have little use for justice as fairness. In a third world country, you treasure any privileged position that you can get and maximize its benefits for your family by way of "corruption". Even after a society has its first taste of affluence (practically no pocket money up to now), for a generation or two, most may well seek to maximize their spending power.

### The true meritocracy

After awhile people become accustomed to affluence. Then, unless you are a sick society infected by materialism, the money intoxication wears off and the school race will be modified in the direction of a better society. Most people will be happy with a decent income, and allocate time to pursue those interests, whether history or philosophy, or arts and crafts, or sport, whatever they feel brings out the best in them. They will want a welfare state that gives all a decent life irrespective of "merit". They will prefer a job that maximizes overlap with what you want to do rather than a job that maximizes income. Not bad from a humane-egalitarian point of view!

If the intoxication with money never wears off, this does not show that humane ideals are counter-productive in practice. It means that something at their very core has been omitted: you do not sell your soul for money. In other words, if Carthaginians get a bastard meritocracy, they deserve nothing less. And remember, even to get that, they must be justice drunk as well as money drunk. Otherwise the school race would deviate so far from fairness that it would degenerate as a measure of genes for "talent" to the vanishing point. Athenians will get something far better: the boarding school after obsession with the school race has waned and a welfare state introduced.

### A dialectical analysis

First, assume a fiction: a "benevolent" market that offers a perfect match between what other people want

to pay you for doing and what you want to do in order to follow your own star. Admittedly, the money you get from the market will tend to be a function of how well you do it, and that will reflect your talent. But there will be a thousand different hierarchies of talent; and all will be valued for their human qualities; and there will be a general willingness to see wealth redistributed to compensate those who are less talented; and therefore, all will have a decent life irrespective of talent

Second, assume a "wicked" market. Even though there is a tension between market rewards and cultivation of individual excellences, as affluence grows, the members of an uncorrupted polis will compromise less and less in favor of market rewards. Since this is possible without want, the tension is no longer very important.

### The IQ prognosis

The above ignores a prediction of the Bell Curve: that as environments tend to equalize and privilege recedes, the offspring of the upper and lower classes will tend to diverge further and further in terms of their mean IQs. Keep in mind that if such a trend is to be significant, America will have to do what it has never done: institute a robust welfare state.

If environments really do become radically more equal, the first result will be that the environmental portion of IQ variance would diminish. So the total spectrum that separates the top and bottom performance on IQ tests would diminish as well.

However, this could be offset by a tendency towards assortive mating. Segregation of young Americans by education may be producing a heightened tendency for like to mate with like. If most children were the offspring of either high-IQ/high-IQ parents or low-IQ/low-IQ parents, with few high-IQ/low-IQ offspring as a moderator, this would enlarge the total IQ test performance spectrum.

Assume privilege gives way to social mobility. That plus the trend to greater environmental equality would increase the correlation between the income and IQ of parents (and the IQ of their offspring). But would this

really mean greater income differences? Ceci and Williams (1997) have pointed out that if America really attained a state of affairs where only IQ affected income differences, it would be the most egalitarian nation on earth. Other sources of income variance greatly expand the spectrum of incomes. However, much of the non-IQ caused variance may be due to chance factors difficult to eliminate. If these remain in existence, and IQ increases its potency to differentiate income, then the income spectrum must expand. Moreover, as we evolve to a more complex society, IQ-related skills might be more and more at a premium and therefore, each point of IQ might be worth more and more money.

### So what?

Assuming that these trends actually occur, what is their human significance? If we find a huge income spectrum obnoxious, we should not be hypnotized by the fact that IQ has become somewhat more important as a causal factor. We still have the usual techniques for redistribution of wealth at our disposal: progressive taxation, progressive inheritance taxes, and the equalizing platform of the welfare state.

How much IQ is a true index of merit is irrelevant in human terms. Even if every hierarchy of talent was perfectly correlated with IQ, even if there was a high correlation between artistic creativity, musical talent, athletic ability, carpentry, sociability, good character (none of which is true by way), the only thing Athenians care about is how much the market rewards their personal path to excellence. IQ is no more than the middle term of the match. EITHER the market rewards IQ and IQ correlates highly with all excellences, so the market rewards all excellences. OR the market rewards IQ and IQ correlates badly with certain excellences, so there is a mismatch between market rewards and the excellences most people want to cultivate.

The tension or lack of tension is the significant thing. Imagine we had never invented IQ tests and did not know about its causal role. What difference would that make to how much we resent these tensions or how we ought to deal with them?

### What we are worth

To object that transfers of wealth will leave some people paid less than they are worth is a kind of blasphemy. What people are worth is known only to God or, for unbelievers, only if we can access the self-knowledge vanity hides deep below the level of normal consciousness. As Tawney (1920) says, if a person has the opportunity to perfect their talents and enough money to allow them to do that properly, they have all of the happiness that is good for any of the children of Adam.

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