

GROUP DIFFERENCES: IS THE GOOD SOCIETY IMPOSSIBLE?

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Introduction

'From a black perspective . . . the notion that a black (who passes for white) might reclaim his ethnic identity to take advantage of preferential admissions can only trigger an almost inexpressible sense of outrage.' (Livingston, 1979)

'Turning an elephant loose in a crowd offers everyone, except the beast and his rider, equal opportunities of being trampled.' (Tawney, 1931)

This paper is about whether the humane–egalitarian ideal of social justice can accommodate the truths with which the best social and biological science confront it. The humane–egalitarian ideal rests on sympathy for people in general, operationalised by levelling differences that are the effects of fortune. It includes affirmative action as a compensation for the luck of group membership, the welfare state as a compensation for the luck of genes, and redistribution of wealth as a compensation for the luck of personal circumstance. Philosophy cannot show that anyone should have sympathy for people in general, which is to say there is no proof that anyone should have a good heart. However, assuming a commitment to humane–egalitarian ideals, it can be shown that those so committed need not hide from any facet of the real world. It is not clear that competing racist or elitist or anti-humane ideals can make the same claim, but that is a matter for another paper.

Blacks as a disadvantaged group

Social science collects evidence on group differences. Sometimes it shows that putative differences between black and white Americans are illusions based on ignorance or bias. That can advantage blacks. Sometimes it shows that differences are real and must be accepted by all rational agents. If those agents are truly rational, they will then make certain choices to the disadvantage of blacks. Social science can do nothing about this except conceal the truth and that it must not do. However, its practitioners must not close their eyes to the consequences of their science. They often say: 'It makes no difference if blacks are genetically inferior for intelligence, are less prudent and self-disciplined than whites, tend to be more criminal. Only a biased person will discriminate against people according to their group membership rather than judging them by their individual traits.' These assertions will be shown to be false.

Social science also attempts to measure how much bias exists. Herrnstein & Murray

(1994) believe that while undeniably some bigotry still exists, the vast majority of Americans are fair-minded and free of racial prejudice. Rather than challenging that conclusion, it will be treated here as a window of opportunity. If it can be shown that even in the absence of bias, individual blacks are gravely disadvantaged simply because of their group membership, that might be the strongest possible case for affirmative action. Therefore, the organising concept of this analysis will not be racial bias but the cost of information.

Levin (1991), in an article unpublished, pointed out that race can be an information-bearing trait. He cited a variety of sources as showing that one black male in four is incarcerated at some time for the commission of a felony, while the rate for white males is only about 3%, and that a black male is ten times more likely than his white counterpart to be a criminal (Hindelang, 1978; Rushton, 1988; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). He endorses the practice of the New Jersey police of stopping young black males in expensive new cars for random drug searches. After all, police resources are stretched and their efficiency in controlling the drug traffic is maximised by information that enhances the probability of finding illegal drugs. The dividends of concentrating on blacks extend to other areas of crime prevention. As a police officer put it, if a black is driving a Porsche and is wearing a suit that costs less than \$100, you stop him on the assumption that the car may be stolen. Anyone who listens to a police radio will discover that blacks who walk through a white neighbourhood are labelled suspicious, while whites in a black neighbourhood go unremarked.

It is rational for police to use race as a low-cost information bearer to enhance their efficiency. Is it rational for blacks to resent this and take steps to make the information more expensive? A few examples may help. Irish Americans have a rate of alcoholism well above that of most ethnic groups. When resources are stretched, as always, and the highway patrol is conducting random checks for drunken drivers, they would do well to stop only Irish male drivers, particularly where Irish residents are heavily concentrated. The problem is that they cannot be identified by appearance and stopping all drivers to verify whether or not they were Irish would be self-defeating. The Irish could be forced, and everyone else forbidden, to drive green cars but that law might be evaded. The rational solution would be shamrocks indelibly tattooed on the foreheads of all Irish males, perhaps luminescent at night. There would be a cost in this but it could be shifted to the Irish themselves. Levin also noted that people associate insider trading with Jewish Americans. This association may not be based on evidence and the resources of the Securities and Exchange Commission may not be stretched. But if those conditions hold, the utility of Stars of David becomes obvious.

Every black knows that Irish and Jewish Americans would raise the cost of collecting this sort of information to a prohibitive level by political action of the most impassioned sort. Their own efforts have had mainly a cosmetic effect: police omit race from the formula of criminal profiles but continue to use it in practice. Therefore, added to whatever humiliation blacks feel at random searches, there is a sense of overwhelming political impotence. Since blacks cannot use politics to raise the cost, it is rational to pursue other means both individually and collectively.

On the individual level, those stopped for random searches will tend towards non-cooperation, verbal abuse, attempts at escape with attendant low-level violence. The police being rational agents are likely to anticipate this and resort to preventive

measures; that is, they are more likely to handle and search black suspects roughly, hoping to intimidate and achieve control, even to perpetrate the occasional beating. The black community can collectively increase costs to the police by making it clear that if black suspects are abused, there is an ever-present chance of riot. These stretch police resources and distract them from the efficient deterrence of crime. There is now a significant level of random violence between police and black males, but there need be no animosity or real bias on either side. Black males may not dislike police simply because they are police, nor police blacks simply because they are black. Both sides may recognise that the other's behaviour is simply a rational response to objective group differences. Stove (1995, p. 95) grants this point, although he adds that rational behaviour, just so long as it inflicts injury, can engender strong negative feelings between groups.

Police use race as an information bearer to justify giving blacks atypical attention. There is considerable debate about whether they use it as a rationale for atypical neglect. The incentives are complex. On the one hand, solving violent crimes in the black ghetto might require a disproportionate investment of time and energy and be given low priority. Livingston (1979, pp. 44–45) reports a homicide detective who gave what he called a 'niggericide', the killing of one ghetto black by another, a much lower priority than a normal homicide. On the other hand, if promotion depends on a high rate of arrests and convictions, police would be motivated to pursue criminals in the ghetto with vigour. The National Black Police Association argues that blacks may suffer less from neglect than from too robust means of law enforcement. Since 1941, 23 black police, working undercover, have been shot by their white colleagues in New York City alone. Perhaps this is an unfortunate by-product of police profiles of blacks as criminals (Charles & Coleman, 1995).

Sowell shares little of the author's political programme. However, he has done much to illuminate how the cost of information affects banks, landlords, employers, and retail outlets in their treatment of blacks. There are two relevant costs: the cost of classifying blacks as members of their group which thanks to their appearance is nil; the cost of determining when a black is an exception to his or her group which can be significant. For example, take a bank that has an excess of apparently sound white applicants for loans over the amount of funds it has to lend. The bank knows that blacks on average have less managerial experience, that their businesses tend to be undercapitalised, that their failure rate is higher, that their collateral is less saleable; all in all, they know that the risk of non-payment is greater. The bank can conduct a thorough investigation of a particular black applicant to determine whether he or she is an exception to the group, but unless their competitors do so, they have incurred an extra cost to their disadvantage. Therefore, they will tend to assess the black applicant as a member of his or her group and refuse the loan.

Landlords also use race as an information-bearing trait. They may prefer Asians, particularly females, because they afford a better chance of a tenant who is docile, will please neighbours thanks to sobriety and reticence, will be prompt and reliable in paying rent. They will not prefer young black males who on average are more likely to be criminal, destructive, noisy, and insolvent. The cost of investigating every tenant as an individual is time-consuming, the cost of classifying blacks is negligible. It is easy to show that avoiding these costs is a rational factor not necessarily tied to racial bias.

Sowell (1994, pp. 111, 114) cites the evidence of Light (1972) and Williams (1974) that successful black banks tend to invest outside the black community even more than white banks do. He cites Tucker (1990) who found that black landlords as well as white landlords prefer white tenants.

Clearly the same factors extend to other areas. Retailers who provide goods and services in the ghetto bear higher costs, not only losses from theft and vandalism but from installing iron grates and hiring security guards. These higher costs are passed on to ghetto residents in the form of higher prices. Employers will discriminate against the members of a group more likely to steal or be on drugs, and less likely to have a dynamic work ethic, in favour of groups with positive traits. As Sowell (1994, p. 89) says, 'it is bitter medicine to the fully qualified individual to be denied employment because of the racial, ethnic, or other group to which he belongs'.

One phrase must not pass unnoticed: that the cost of classifying an individual as black is negligible. This puts blacks at a disadvantage compared to white ethnic groups because the cost of classifying the members of those groups can be expensive. When Mr Bell comes to one's door, it may be almost impossible to determine that his father is Mr Bellini and that he has strong ties with suspect elements in the Italian community. This disadvantage is not trivial. Imagine an omnipresent mutation that left blacks exactly as they are except their appearances became a random sample of white America. Overnight the cost of classifying blacks as such, of identifying the people who had once been black, would be far too great for anyone to pay, whether police, bank manager, landlord, retailer, or employer. Disadvantage among no-longer blacks because of group membership would fade into the lesser disadvantages of class or neighbourhood. Blackness really does make a difference.

The use of race as an information-bearing trait carries over to personal relationships. White parents concerned for their children's welfare will attempt to prevent them from marrying blacks. Since parents usually get to know their children's lovers without making a special effort, it might appear that the cost of judging potential partners as individuals, rather than as members of their group, is negligible. However, given the power of young love, and the incomprehensible reluctance of young people to allow their parents to arrange marriages, the relevant information comes too late to be operationalised. Therefore, parents take preventive measures. First, steps to segregate their children from blacks of the opposite sex, particularly after puberty. Second, and far more important, white children are socialised with a taboo so powerful as to overcome sexual attraction and burgeoning affection. The effectiveness of these measures can be judged by the fact that only 3% of American blacks marry non-blacks (Staples, 1985, pp. 1007–1008). This contrasts with New Zealand where marriage between Pakeha (whites) and Maori (Polynesians) is the norm. The paucity of black–white marriages in America cannot be assigned to lack of sexual attraction. The response of whites to black media stars, sports people, and prostitutes, and vice versa, provides evidence to the contrary.

The fact that black women do not have the option of marrying white men has devastating social consequences, often not appreciated. The percentage of black women that are solo-mothers is the mirror image of the number of black men in steady work. That is, the number of black men in steady work per 100 women, deducted from 100, is approximately the percentage of solo-mother homes. In the 1960s, when the number

of black males in steady work stood at 71 per 100 women, solo-mother homes were about 25% when the number fell to 51 per 100, solo-mother homes rose to 50%. Black solo-mothers tend to be poor and have more children than other mothers so this phenomenon alone dictates that 47% of black children will be raised in poverty. Black women face a tragic choice: never have children at all, or have them with men too demoralised to be promising as permanent partners. No other group has been faced with that choice. At the turn of the century when unemployment and alcoholism were prevalent among Irish men, Irish women simply married outside their ethnic group (Flynn, 1991, pp. 130, 135).

Blacks and affirmative action

The analysis thus far has detailed how much of the black experience in America is dictated purely by a rational response to objective group differences. Needless to say, three-quarters of black males are never convicted of a felony, most blacks are good workers, tenants, and neighbours. That is the whole point: they suffer because of bad luck in terms of group membership. A few white Americans will have such a strong sense of fair play that it will override self-interested decision making. Given what Adam is like and what Eve is like, there will not be many. On the other hand, there may still be one or two racists left in American society and if so, racial prejudice will encumber blacks with additional negative experiences. However, the effects of racial bias are extraneous to the argument.

Blacks will suffer disadvantage until group differences alter. No one expects police to search white matrons in suburban neighbourhoods for drugs as they do young black males. Remedial legislation to force banks, landlords, employers, and retailers to treat blacks as individuals or as typical consumers is clumsy and often counter-productive. Sowell (1994, pp. 206–207) details how laws have been evaded when rational responses to group differences were at stake. The best historical example benefited blacks. Before abolition, Southern cities passed law after law against teaching slaves to read or write, forbidding them access to pubs and prostitutes, forbidding paying them wages, all to no avail because employers could hire skilled blacks more cheaply than they could their white counterparts. Legislation will never circumvent human ingenuity, abolish discretion, close off private networks, unless you recruit an army of secret police.

Since one cannot address adequately the specific evils blacks suffer, compensation must come in other areas. The public service is not subject to market pressures and preferential entry into jobs can compensate for disadvantage in the private sector. Public housing can compensate for disadvantage in the private housing market. Efforts must be made to upgrade the ghetto, but for many the only solution is escape, and preferential access to education provides a means. The consequences of affirmative action programmes must be carefully assessed because good intentions are not enough. They are meant, after all, to benefit blacks not harm them. It is no service to blacks if universities introduce a body count which mismatches blacks with universities, so that they are slaughtered when they cannot meet prevailing academic standards (Sowell, 1972). It is no service to anyone to have a job whose demands they cannot meet and to spend their life feeling humiliated and defeated.

A case for compensation must answer the question of how much. America already

compensates blacks in a variety of ways, but perhaps compensation has already gone too far and should be diminished. The empirical task of assessing whether benefits conferred counter-balance disadvantages suffered because of group membership may be impossibly difficult. Therefore, a criterion will be suggested for an easier task, namely, determining how many American whites really believe that compensation has gone too far. It consists of a question: how many whites would choose to become black, assuming continuity of those personal traits like intelligence and motivation most relevant to achievement? If it is really believed that blacks are advantaged beyond their competence in American society, any rational white should find the black experience attractive. What is being chosen, of course, is a black life-history, to have had a black past, have a black present, and face a black future. It may be objected that a different socialisation would have produced a different human being. So, there will be a guarantee not only of continuity of personal traits but of core personality, so as to solve the problem of personal identity.

Ethnic identity or group pride can also act as a distractor. Many whites take considerable pride in being an Irish American or an Italian American. Many blacks know that it would be advantageous to be white but would not choose to join a group towards whom they have developed a certain degree of ambivalence. For whites with a significant degree of ethnic identity, the best way to confront the question honestly is this: assume one is being forced to give up one's present ethnic identity; choose between being black and a white identity that awakens no special sense of belonging, perhaps being an Icelandic American.

Some of these complications can be avoided by reformulating the question: were you and your partner to die soon after the birth of a child, would you prefer that child to be raised by black adoptive parents or white adoptive parents; this is assuming the two couples were matched for personal traits and that the child would magically absorb the skin colour of the parents, so as to eliminate any alienation arising out of different appearance. Most people care as much for the welfare of their children as they do for themselves and if few whites would choose the black option, there is a *prima facie* case that few of them believe that the black experience has become a privileged one.

The principle that blacks merit compensation because of bad luck in group membership may be accepted as a *prima facie* one and yet, objections may be posed as candidates to override it. A frequent objection is that blacks will sometimes be compensated at the expense of whites who are even more disadvantaged. That is true and the ideal would be to collect information about individual differences that would allow such cases to be isolated and exceptions made. But if the price of this information is prohibitive, then one must choose between accepting affirmative action without it or abandoning affirmative action. The argument against abandoning affirmative action is clear: failure to compensate blacks, because that would injure disadvantaged white individuals, will leave an even greater number of black individuals injured without compensation. So is the price of the information prohibitive?

It can be shown to be so by analysing the case of veterans compensation (Ezorsky, 1991, pp. 79, 91). This programme was by no means negligible. After World War II, America decided to compensate over 10 million people who had served in the armed forces, a group which, inclusive of their immediate families, outnumbered black Americans at that time. Veterans received preferential entry into civil service jobs and

targeted benefits, ranging from subsidised education and health care to pensions to special hospitals and retirement homes. Veterans often benefited at the expense of non-veterans who were more disadvantaged. Ideally there would exist some sort of ambulatory philosopher king, a source of walking wisdom, who would say, 'this Boston Brahmin had a cushy job in army supply, while this Polish American spent the war in Gary, Indiana working in a dangerous steel mill'. Therefore, no preference. That is not a realistic alternative. The only real world alternative imaginable is a semi-judicial inquiry with the brief of assessing the advantages and disadvantages of life histories. The cost of that sort of information about individual differences would include unacceptable invasions of privacy, enormous difficulties in securing testimony and assessing its reliability and relevance, and huge expenditures in time and money.

Affirmative action, like veterans preference, the police, the banks, and the landlords, uses group membership as an information-bearing trait. Race signals that some people on average have suffered much more because of their group membership than others. To burden affirmative action with collecting information about individual differences would make it unworkable because the relevant information carries the highest cost imaginable. Much lower costs would hamper crime prevention, disadvantage banks in favour of less scrupulous competitors, push landlords towards private networking rather than offering their premises to the public. American after American finds the cost of information about individual differences too high when disadvantaging blacks. To use such costs to forbid benefiting blacks makes an interesting exception to the rule.

The real difference between veterans preference and affirmative action is that America really did want to confer a group benefit on veterans; and America is ambivalent about conferring a group benefit on blacks. This ambivalence is striking when we reflect on why blacks need compensation. The very essence of racial profiles is to confer a group benefit on whites while ignoring individual differences among blacks. It amounts to nothing less than a systemic affirmative action programme that gives whites special access to loans, accommodation, jobs, an advantageous marriage market, travel and walking the streets without harassment. Whites do not think of this as special access, of course, because it is only special compared to what blacks get. When affirmative action causes a problem, why is it objectionable as a remedy?

Another objection pushed as a candidate to override the principle of compensating blacks is that benefits go disproportionately to the black middle class. Certainly programmes should be designed to ensure that lower class blacks benefit. Public housing is likely to attract a largely working class clientele, special bonuses for teachers and administrators can be used to upgrade ghetto schools, clinics and other amenities located in working class areas, educational programmes for basic job skills, budgeting, knowledge of welfare rights, and fertility control directed towards those areas. A good test of the sincerity of those who claim sympathy with lower class blacks would be that they have no objection to preferential entry into the lower as distinct from the upper levels of the civil service. It is always hardest to benefit the most demoralised numbers of any group. Certainly it is not sensible to benefit no blacks at all because benefits cannot be class-neutral within the black community. It would make sense to exclude middle class blacks entirely, if it is contended that they have prospered to the point that they suffer no significant disadvantage because of their group membership. That

contention suggests a variant of the original question put to white Americans: how many whites who are clearly middle class would choose a black life history, assuming continuity of personal traits and core personality?

This is a reminder that the original question has gone unanswered. Recall the adoption formulation: 'How many whites would be indifferent as to whether their new-born child got white or black adoptive parents, assuming a match for traits and colour?' It would be difficult to conduct an honest opinion survey. But, as Plato in *The Republic* said of justice, has not the answer to this question been lying unnoticed all the time, in the pathetically low rate of intermarriage between black and white Americans? White after white, despite powerful sexual attraction, has chosen not to make their children black because they know, they know very well, that to do so would be to give their children bad luck in terms of group membership. Even when most Anglo-Saxon Americans despised the Irish, the Italians, the Poles, they married into those groups. But did anyone marry blacks? They did not. And yet, during slavery, when they did not have to care about their children's prospects, white men fathered numerous black children.

The time to take seriously the belief that middle class blacks are not disadvantaged is the day middle class whites marry those blacks in large numbers. A society that acknowledges that the members of a group suffer much because of their group membership and yet, gives high-minded reasons for refusing to compensate them as such, forfeits a measure of respect.

This analysis does not assume that justice requires equal outcomes for black and white. It merely aims at a situation where whites believe there is an equal chance of equal outcomes, assuming traits relevant to competence are held constant. If such traits are unequally distributed between the races, outcomes will not be equal. It also makes no assumptions about the origin of group differences, about whether they are caused by genetic or environmental differences or a combination of the two (Flynn, 1980; 1987a,b; 1989; 1990; 1991; 1992). Perhaps the tenor of the analysis appears pessimistic. It accepts that American whites often disadvantage blacks by choices motivated by self-interest, although some actors, such as the police, cannot be convicted of that. Pessimism should not be total. It is a happy paradox that people often ask government to coerce them into doing good. Many affluent people vote for progressive taxation who set aside little for private charity. People are even more ready to force other people to do good. Most whites will never lose a place at university, or a promotion, or a job to a black. Willingness to sacrifice the interests of others for an ideal is not pretty, but it is politics and a kind of politics which does much good. Without the 'little to lose' North coercing the 'much to lose' South, blacks might have remained slaves for many decades.

Equality and meritocracy

The humane-egalitarian ideal of social justice goes beyond compensation for the luck of group membership. It endorses the welfare state on the grounds that all people, unless they forfeit it by criminal or irresponsible behaviour, should be able to live a decent life. They do not have to earn the right to do that by good luck in the genetic lottery, nor do they have to have unusual talent or virtue. The humane-egalitarian

ideal endorses the redistribution of wealth as a compensation for the luck of personal circumstance. There will be some people, of course, who earn high incomes despite below average genetic endowment, despite humble birth, despite misfortune. But lucky genes and lucky circumstances are positively correlated with success; and redistribution of wealth helps rectify the balance sheet. Those of high income who are debited unfairly can afford it. The injury done them does not match the benefits conferred on the poor.

There is no sharp division of labour between the welfare state and redistribution of wealth. Using the former to ensure that all children benefit from a decent environment irrespective of genetic inheritance, redistributes wealth to finance housing, schooling, nutrition, and health care for all. When progressive taxation, superannuation, and death duties are used to counterbalance the luck of personal circumstance, adults who benefit will count as one of their blessings an enhanced ability to benefit their children. Programatically the two are functionally interrelated. Sometimes to make their two objectives clear, they are equated with equalising environments and abolishing privilege and those labels are quite acceptable.

Humane-egalitarian ideals may appeal to our sense of justice, but can they accommodate objective group differences and the truths of science? Herrnstein & Murray (1994) claim that humane ideals cannot accommodate the truths of human genetics and sociology. The meritocracy thesis serves as the vehicle for their argument. However, the meritocracy thesis can be rebutted and even used to extract a bonus: a deeper insight into the dynamics of humane-egalitarian ideals.

Herrnstein & Murray (1994, pp. 105, 109, 510) state the meritocracy thesis in four propositions. (1) If differences in mental abilities are inherited, and (2) if success requires those abilities, and (3) if earnings and prestige depend on success, (4) then social standing (which reflects earnings and prestige) will be based to some extent on inherited differences between people. They imagine a United States that has magically made good on 'the contemporary ideal of equality'. First, every child has equal environmental quality in so far as environment affects intelligence. Second, each person can go as far as talent and hard work can take him (or her) with neither social background, nor ethnicity, nor lack of money barring the way.

Herrnstein & Murray (1994, pp. 91, 105–115, 509–520) believe that America has realised the humane-egalitarian ideal in practice to a significant degree. The irony is that in so far as it is realised, America approaches a kind of caste society egalitarians would loath. If environmental inequality is diminished, intelligence differences between individuals increasingly reflect genetic differences. If privilege is diminished, intelligence or IQ becomes an enhanced factor in social mobility, so that upper class occupations become filled by the bright and lower class occupations by the not bright. Genes for intelligence become more and more segregated by class. There is an elite class with good genes for IQ whose children tend to replicate their parents' high status because of luck in life's lottery, that is, because they inherit their parents' good genes. There is a large underclass with bad genes for IQ whose children suffer from cognitive disadvantage at birth and find it difficult to escape low status.

The meritocracy thesis strikes at the very heart of the humane-egalitarian ideal. That ideal is revealed to be counter-productive in practice. The abolition of inequality and privilege produces a class-equals-caste society with high status the inheritance of a few, dependency and low status the inheritance of many. How little this vision will

appeal will vary from person to person, but it is safe to say that countless idealistic men and women did not lay down their lives for this.

Herrnstein & Murray select 1960 as the year by which America saw potent meritocratic mechanisms in place. They posit a trend towards meritocracy and this generates a prediction that can be tested against evidence. The more meritocracy, the more good genes for IQ go to high status occupations, the more bad genes to low status occupations. The genes are passed on from parent to child, so the more meritocracy, the more of an IQ gap between upper and lower class children. If Herrnstein & Murray are correct, the gap between upper and lower class children should show a visible jump when representative samples of children tested recently are compared with those tested in the pre-meritocratic era. The best evidence comes from white American samples and Flynn (1995) shows that these falsify the posited trend towards meritocracy. The correlation between child's IQ and parental occupational status has been surprisingly stable from 1948 to the present. The pattern is a mean IQ of 105 for upper-class children, 100 for middle-class children, 95 for lower-class children. The most parsimonious conclusion is this: absolutely nothing has happened.

However, the best that evidence can do is show that meritocratic trends do not exist at a particular time and place. This leaves the central contention of the meritocracy thesis untouched. That contention is that if the humane-egalitarian quest of abolishing inequality and privilege is successful, it will result in class stratification of genes for talent of which IQ is a marker. If such stratification has not occurred, the quest has simply been unsuccessful. Moreover, Herrnstein & Murray claim that a meritocratic future is inevitable. This means that the humane-egalitarian ideal has been given a reprieve both temporary and humiliating. It is a poor ideal that must pray for eternal failure in order to avoid unwelcome consequences. Therefore, evidence must be supplemented by analysis.

The core of a psychological analysis can be stated with economy. (1) The abolition of materialist-elitist values is a prerequisite for the abolition of inequality and privilege. (2) The persistence of materialist-elitist values is a prerequisite for class stratification based on wealth and status. (3) Therefore, a class-stratified meritocracy is impossible.

To defend the first proposition, the major barrier to abolition of inequality and privilege is greed and status seeking. Progressive taxation, redistribution of wealth, death duties, welfare, public job creation, publicly funded health and education, all founder on the rocks of the love of money in one's own pocket, the lust for status superior to one's fellows, the desire to confer advantage for these things on one's family. Test scores and credentials may play a role in the status game, but this does not prevent upper-class parents from giving their children enormous advantages. Educationally efficient homes point them towards superior credentials. Personal networks of relatives, friends, and neighbours, locate desirable jobs. The National Center for Career Strategies was reported in 1990 as stating that over 80% of executives find their jobs through networking, and that about 86% of available jobs do not appear in the classified advertisements (Ezorsky, 1991, pp. 14-16). Upper class parents will always find ways of bending the rules in favour of their children. An America in which everyone wants to win the glittering prizes of wealth and status will not pay onerous taxes, nor show heroic virtue when tempted to seek special advantage, just so the competition can enjoy equality of opportunity.

To defend the second proposition, were people to lose their obsession with money and status, the class hierarchy that ranks by income and an agreed pecking order of occupations would be diluted beyond recognition. People must care about that hierarchy for it to be socially significant, or even for it to exist. Imagine a society in which the appreciation of beauty, the pursuit of truth, craft skills, being fit, companionship, family feeling, and so forth, really counted for more than having above average income and possessions. Some people would be better than others at all of these things but there would be at least a score of non-comparable hierarchies and being better would not necessarily carry financial rewards. Even today there are executives who care less about promotion than running a good 10 k. The decline of elitist values, less joy in the sheer fact you are better at something than others, is also relevant. Superior performance would persist, but less status, less passion, less of a sense of being a better human being would attend superior performance.

In sum, the meritocracy thesis is psychologically incoherent: it posits a society with a hierarchy based on money and status but in which money and status count for nothing in attaining places in that hierarchy. And humane-egalitarian ideals, rather than self-destructing in practice, possess a self-correcting mechanism that avoids meritocratic excess. The truth is that one cannot push equality much beyond the ability to humanise.

The case against meritocracy can also be put sociologically. (1) Allocating rewards irrespective of merit is a prerequisite for meritocracy, otherwise environments cannot be equalised. (2) Allocating rewards according to merit is a prerequisite for meritocracy, otherwise people cannot be stratified by wealth and status. (3) Therefore, a class-stratified meritocracy is impossible.

This reveals an ambiguity at the heart of the meritocracy thesis, namely, failure to specify the quality of the equalised environments assumed. For most people, giving everyone an equal chance would mean that the lowest level of environmental quality would have to be rather good. Yet equalisation is to co-exist with a large immiserated underclass; and that class must compete with an elite with an environment so potent that they constitute a menace to democracy (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, pp. 509–526). The ideal that truly self-destructs in practice is the meritocratic ideal. Those who think it inevitable should give it a plausible social dynamic. They can begin by explaining how environmental equality is to be achieved when a large underclass is already knocking at the door. Or conversely, how an underclass is to emerge, if society keeps topping up their environmental quality to maintain the level needed for equal opportunity. It is significant that Herrnstein & Murray imagine environments being equalised by magic. Magic's next task is to reconcile equality with a large underclass. Its final task should be to square the circle.

The sociological analysis reinforces the psychological analysis. The higher the quality of the environment all enjoy irrespective of merit, the less attractive the prizes left for the winners. If all have decent work, housing, education, health care, security in old age, what remains is not essential for happiness. Many people of talent may want more than the not-unattractive minimum, but how many will care about shaking the last dollar out of the money tree? Social scientists can go on publishing hierarchies that rank the whole population by occupational status, but these will fall short of ranking people by merit, much less genes for talent. An over-enthusiastic sports master can

force everyone to participate in the annual school run, but he or she cannot force them to train or try. The published results will not stratify people for genes for running ability. Humane ideals do not gestate a meritocracy: their natural role is to act as its executioner.

A final disclaimer: this analysis makes no prediction about how far one can go towards humanising people away from materialistic and elitist values; it does not even say how far one should go. The caution does not come from recognising that people disadvantage blacks because of rational self-interest. The fact that bankers, retailers, and employers want to survive market competition is quite compatible with putting woodwork ahead of plotting to be president of General Motors. The caution comes from an inability to predict history. What the analysis does attempt is to describe the dynamic interaction between humane values and egalitarian ideals, to show that radical progress beyond the status quo for one assumes radical progress for the other. It attempts to show that when critics write a scenario that assumes radical equality of opportunity conjoined with the present obsession with wealth and status, they simply are not thinking clearly.

Celebrating humane ideals

The humane–egalitarian ideal of social justice has been defended. But justice is not the only great good, and sometimes the pursuit of a particular ideal requires unpleasant trade-offs with other goods. Therefore, a few points to indicate why such a thing is unlikely.

Affirmative action, the welfare state, redistribution of wealth would impede the utilitarian goal of the greatest happiness if these programmes wrecked the economy. If they avoid the existence of a large, unemployed, demoralised underclass, they should benefit the economy. The UN list of the seven nations that have the highest standards of living includes four, perhaps five, that have highly developed welfare states. Mobilising support for compensating blacks would deter the pursuit of truth if research on the roles of genes and the environment were forbidden. That simply must not be allowed to happen. Sometimes an egalitarian society is said to be counterproductive to the creation of beauty. If so, as Huxley (1962) shows, the trade-off is limited and worth it. The proliferation of the lower classes is said to lower the perfection of the human species, by threatening its genetic quality. The best way to prevent the lower classes from breeding is to give them a middle class life style. An egalitarian society is said to be a leveller that destroys human diversity. Few groups value the diversity poverty preserves. Any group that wishes can withdraw into its own subculture like the Hasidic Jews of Brooklyn or the Amish of Pennsylvania.

Humane–egalitarian ideals possess not only goodness but beauty. They confront Fortuna with justice in all of her manifestations and this confers a pleasing symmetry. They possess a great glory: a built-in self-correcting mechanism that avoids meritocratic excess. The trinity will never be complete because one cannot claim ethical truth on their behalf. There is no such thing as ethical truth. However, those committed to humane–egalitarian ideals can make a perhaps unique claim: they can look reality and the truths of science full in the face and find nothing that makes them flinch.

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