

Education, Justice, Ideal Theory, and Non-ideal Theory

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I am very grateful for the opportunity to respond to Ken Howe's bracing and interesting presidential essay. I am one of the targets of his criticism, and it's hard to know what to do in this case because, while I do believe some version of the meritocratic principle is true, I have no particular interest in defending it. Other values and principles are more important, even when it is interpreted the way I interpret it, which is somewhat different from Howe's interpretation of it. Because I think other values and principles are *much* more important in most contexts, and insofar as I care that people understand what I believe to be true, I am not entirely happy to give a misimpression by devoting my response to a defense of this, not very important, principle. But I shall spend some time doing so anyway.

Howe's essay is divided into three parts. The first attacks the idea of natural talent, which, he thinks, is essential to the idea of meritocracy and, additionally, is a myth. The second argues that the ideas of natural talent and meritocracy serve an ideological function, in that they support prevalent ideas the widespread belief in which results in various social evils such as racism and sexism and makes it more difficult to ameliorate those evils. Finally, he advances an alternative to meritocracy, which he calls democratic equality.

I. IS NATURAL TALENT A MYTH AND DOES IT MATTER ANYWAY?

Michael Young introduced meritocracy as a dystopian idea.¹ A fully meritocratic society would be worse in some respects than the one he inhabited, he thought, because although it would be just as unequal, one source of social solidarity, and one source of comfort to the victims of injustice, would be undermined. The source of social solidarity is the sense that "there, but for the grace of God, go I." If we believe that our success rests entirely on something as fundamental to who we are as our inborn characteristics, then, even if we acknowledge that those are morally arbitrary, we would know that there is no contingency to *our* level of success (except the contingency of us being exactly who we are). The false, and very natural, tendency to credit ourselves for, and thus think of ourselves as deserving, what is merely good fortune would be reinforced. The same feature of society would undermine a source of comfort for the victims of injustice. If they understood the social structure, they could not, as they could if they understood ours, think something like "Well, the explanation for why I have done badly relative to someone else is that they were better born, or luckier"; they would have to believe that it was, instead, because those others were more naturally talented and/or harder working.²

Young was concerned to illuminate the social costs of having inequalities in the reward schedule track natural inequalities. The version of the meritocratic principle he imagines (but does not endorse) *mandates* inequalities that track natural talent. But the version of the meritocratic principle that Howe quotes, and the variants that I, personally, have endorsed, do not call for *any* inequalities. They are modeled on

John Rawls's variant of Young's principle, which he calls "fair equality of opportunity," which, rather than mandating inequalities grounded on differences of talent, simply impugns inequalities of prospects that are influenced by social exigencies, such as social class background. Fair equality of opportunity, and its analogue in education, the meritocratic principle, single out one illegitimate source of unequal prospects. Both principles are consistent with prospects being entirely equal — in fact, semantically, they are consistent with prospects being *inverse* to talents. These versions of the meritocratic principle might be false, but that needs to be argued. The principles are also consistent with there being no such thing as natural talent. So it is easy to see why meritocrats would not be troubled if there were no such thing.

That said, I do think there is such a thing as natural talent, and find Howe's enthusiasm for denying it puzzling, especially given that he effectively accepts its existence, when he starts out by noting congenital anomalies such as microcephaly, and then says that these are special cases from which we cannot generalize. In fact there are a wide range of cognitive and other kinds of impairments, and I disagree that they are special cases in any interesting sense: any good theory of justice, including any good theory of justice in education, should be comprehensive enough to include such cases as part of the theory, not a separate add-on.

To say that there is such a thing as natural talent is only to say that innate characteristics, if unenhanced, set limits to what we can do. Even if we were all completely *equal* in what our limits were (which we are not), then although differences of talent would play no explanatory role in differences in success, still there would be such a thing as the natural talent common to all of us. None of us can (naturally) fly, all can breathe, all can ingest, and all that is natural. Compare natural talent with eye color. If everyone had blue eyes, eye color would play no explanatory role in unequal success. It would not follow, though, that eye color was a myth.

But, in fact, even within the nonimpaired range, our natural talents are not equal. All it means to say that two people are unequally talented is that they have innate characteristics that interact with the environment to produce differences in capabilities. In the exact same environment any two people might grow to different heights, one might become stronger, or more musically accomplished, more kinesthetically capable, more verbally dexterous. And, in any given macroenvironment, we can expect some of those talents to be more marketable and some more socially valuable (not, unfortunately, necessarily the same ones). Which are more marketable, and which more socially valuable, will depend on what the society values, the prevailing technology, and even the existing distribution of developed talent.

Two natural questions arise. First, can we detect when inequalities of capabilities are explained partly by inequalities of natural talent? Among people whose natural talents are within the normal range this might be difficult, of course, because it is difficult to identify differences in microenvironment with any precision, and unethical to do the kind of experimental work that would be needed to make precise calculations of effects of features of microenvironments on success, even when doing so is possible. It is difficult to disentangle to effects of nature and the environment. But scientists can identify genetic contributors to many human differences, differences

that interact with environments to cause inequalities of success. From the fact that it is very difficult to disentangle the effects of environment from those of nature I would not want to conclude that the environment has no effects, and I see no reason to want to conclude that nature has no effects.

Second, does it matter, for practical purposes, whether the causes of an inequality of capabilities is caused by nature or the environment? Sometimes it does not. But sometimes it does: from the fact that two children have the same capability deficiency it does not follow that we should treat them identically. If it is caused by some easily changeable feature of the environment in one child, but by some unchangeable natural condition in the other, that could matter for treatment. If we had the relevant knowledge, we might then seek to change the conditions one child inhabits, while focusing on developing some compensating capability in the other child.

In general, I am not someone who thinks philosophers should bend to common sense. But the above comments are common sense, and it seems to me that denying even that there is such a thing as natural talent is something you would do only if you had lots of contrary evidence. The claim may not be true I suppose, but nothing in Howe's essay suggests that it is not true.

II. IDEOLOGY

Howe's second central claim is that the idea of natural talent and the meritocratic conception operate *ideologically* — that is, that they function to justify and maintain the status quo and the various injustices that are part of the status quo. Now, exploration of the way that ideology works in society is a difficult empirical task, and I think it is best done in collaboration with social scientists, rather than by philosophers alone, so I am reluctant to say too much about this part of the essay. I am not entirely sure what the thesis is, though. Clearly Rawls, myself, and other philosophers who endorse some version of meritocracy do not justify the status quo — in my own case, as well as that of my collaborator Adam Swift, the idea of meritocracy is used as a wedge to illuminate the *illegitimacy* of both the educational inequalities and the inequalities of outcome that characterize the status quo, and, in fact, ultimately to show that the assumption that inequalities that track natural talent are unproblematic is wrong. Not that this matters very much, because I doubt (even though I might regret) that Rawls's, or my, or any other philosopher's scholarly work serves to help maintain, or to upset, the status quo.

The thesis might be a different one — that the prevailing public beliefs about natural talent, and the simply false (but apparently widely held) belief that natural talent and the efforts of the talented are what explain outcomes, serve to legitimize and help to maintain the outcomes that we see around us. What politicians, journalists, and opinion makers say and think about natural talent and meritocracy might have some effect? Maybe. That's an interesting and possibly true empirical claim, and one that I would like to see evidence about, but it is one that doesn't really have much bearing on what the truth is about either whether natural talent exists or whether meritocratic principles are true. But it is worth distinguishing between the publically endorsed claim that America is, in reality, a meritocracy — a falsehood that is often stated by people who either know, or ought to know, better — and the

claim that meritocracy would be a good thing. Evidence that spreading the former claim may help maintain the status quo is not evidence that spreading the latter claim has the same effect.

III. IDEAL AND NON-IDEAL THEORIZING

The following point in Howe's essay helps me segue into my final topic, the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theorizing:

A fourth way in which the meritocratic conception helps rationalize — and reproduce — educational inequality is by its embrace of a fair competition as the model for the fair distribution of education. The ultimate rewards for winning the competition are employment, income, wealth, and other private goods.

Later he expands on this point:

In the meritocratic conception, educational accomplishments function within a competitive system of distribution. The competition is zero-sum: there can only be so many winners, and when any given individual increases the quantity and quality of her education, it increases her chances and diminishes the chances of others to win the competition and the prize of increased access to goods such as employment, income, and wealth. The competition is rendered fair by ensuring the winners are determined solely on the basis of natural talent and motivation.

I think this description constitutes a puzzling misunderstanding of what people who endorse the meritocratic principle believe, and it is a misunderstanding that I detect in the work of Elizabeth Anderson and other sufficientarians about education as well. I don't *embrace* designing the type of society that Howe describes. I *live in* a society that is designed that way, and so do, and will, the children whose education I am concerned with. It is bad. In some, better organized, societies, the design of the economy and the character of social norms would reduce dramatically the extent to which positional goods influence our lives. But in our society there is a lot of positional and zero-sum competition. When we do ideal theory, we do not need to attend to the actual features of our own society, because we are attempting to arrive at a set of principles which, taken together, would inform institutions that would, when so informed, be perfectly just. But a great deal of my own work is not in ideal theory exactly; it involves theorizing about our existing, non-ideal society and asking what values we should prioritize if we are concerned with making our society more just, or just better, given the real constraints on what can be done within a particular time frame. My view, and that of many people who endorse the meritocratic principle, is that in our non-ideal society we should try to make the socially constructed competitions for the unjustly unequally distributed benefits and burdens of social cooperation fairer, because, in the time frame we are concerned with, we do not anticipate large changes in the distribution of rewards. Of course, simultaneously, insofar as they can do so, well-motivated political agents work to redesign society so that the stakes attached to winning and losing are lower, and to alter the social norms governing social organization. As the stakes decrease, so does the urgency of making the competitions fair; the reason that fairness matters as much as it does is because the (in fact unjust) inequalities are as large as they are. That said, it is worth adding that the most promising strategies for making success in the competitions less dependent on social background simultaneously involve reducing the inequalities themselves. As long as children are raised in families (which, in my opinion, they

should be), those families must be more equally situated for child-rearing success. Reducing inequality of outcome insofar as we can would be a valuable contribution to equalizing opportunity.

Howe says about Anderson, on whom he leans, that

Anderson's general view is typically associated with an adequacy, or threshold, or sufficientarian principle of distributive justice, *as opposed to* an equalization principle. This characterization is misleading. "Democratic equality," Anderson's Rawlsian label that I also adopt, is "egalitarian in its conception of just relationships among citizens but sufficientarian in its conception of justice in the distribution of resources and opportunities."³

And he says, rightly, that Anderson sees the meritocratic regime as exemplifying a "politics of envy."

Anderson denies, and Howe seems to endorse this denial, that, once everybody has enough to relate to other citizens as equals, there is any reason of justice to re-distribute toward equality of resources, or capabilities, or welfare. In other words, her view is *monistically* sufficientarian about the distribution of resources and opportunities. I am not sure how to argue with this view if you are determined to hold it, but it seems wrong. Suppose, suddenly, a new technology raises social production (that is, the production of socially valuable benefits, benefits that really improve the quality of people's lives) but that any distribution of that new social product will be compatible with everyone continuing to have enough. Do you want to say that equality provides *no reason at all* not to allow it all to go to the person, or group, whose prospects are best? As I say, Anderson believes that, because she insists that those of us who endorse egalitarianism about justice in distribution are wrong to do so *at all*, even though we are all pluralists and see equality as just one, and not necessarily the most important, of several sometimes conflicting considerations of distributive justice. The belief that when two people's lives are going fine, but one person's life is going considerably worse, we have, simply because of the inequality, a reason to prioritize improving the worse-off person's life over improving the better-off person's life, even at some cost to the better-off person's life, does not, to me, seem like an embodiment of the politics of envy. To see this, think about the state of mind of the better-off person. Suppose she sees her better-offness as entirely due to her having been a better person than the other person and says, "No, there is *no reason of justice at all* to prioritize the worse-off person." If we are going to use terms like the "politics of envy" to impugn distributive egalitarians, the attitude I have described seems like a politics of hubris and callousness. By contrast, imagine that she understands that her better-offness is just a matter of having been luckier in various ways than the other person: if, still, she says there is no reason at all to prioritize the other person, that seems like a politics of solipsism and complacency.

In the case of education, a sufficientarian standard seems similarly unlikely to be satisfactory as a comprehensive distributive theory. Imagine a society in which everyone has an adequate education. Some new technology improves productivity in education. Should justice be completely indifferent to whether the new educational resources go to better-off or worse-off students? Now imagine a society in which half the students have an adequate education, 25 percent are just below adequacy,

and 25 percent are so far below adequacy that whatever we do for them, they will not reach adequacy. Improved productivity allows us to tip the 25 percent over the adequacy threshold. Should we do so? My intuition is that, at least under certain circumstances, we should not. The reason is that in some circumstances (those in which positional competition dominates the economy, for example) doing so will actually *reduce* the life prospects of the 25 percent for whom we are doing nothing: they will (in some circumstances) be worse off because their main competitors in our (individualistic, competitive) society for various important goods that are, at least within a significant time frame, positional are among the 25 percent who get tipped over the threshold. The sufficientarian standard, at least as it has been specified in the literature, either gives us no guidance or gets the wrong result in cases like these.

In this case, I should add, it is not *equality* that gets us the right result, but the principle that, in my view, should have much more weight in most circumstances: that we should distribute education in the way that benefits the least advantaged.⁴

IV. CONCLUDING COMMENT

In sum, I don't think that Howe has given us good reasons to reject meritocracy as part of a theory of justice, although I do believe that meritocracy is not a weighty principle within distributive justice either at the societal level or within educational justice. I also disagree, quite strongly, that disability is a special case either for ideal theory or for non-ideal theory — it is a normal feature of any decent society that our theories should address as a matter of course, not in an ad hoc way. And I have given no reason to reject sufficiency as a component of justice in either ideal or non-ideal theory, but I have tried to give reasons to think that it is not all that there is to justice.

1. Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033: An Essay on Education and Inequality* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958).

2. It is worth noting, right away, that there is no reason to think that meritocracy would have this effect if, instead of being the sole principle of distribution as in Young's dystopia, it is combined with the difference principle, as in Rawls's theory of justice.

3. Here Howe quotes Elizabeth Anderson, "Rethinking Equality of Opportunity: Comment on Adam Swift's *How Not to Be a Hypocrite*," *Theory and Research in Education* 2, no. 2 (2004): 106.

4. See Gina Schouten, "Fair Educational Opportunity and the Distribution of Natural Ability: Toward a Prioritarian Principle of Educational Justice," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 46, no. 3 (2012): 472–491, for defense of a principle of distributing education to benefit the least advantaged. Also see Gina Schouten and Harry Brighouse, "Redistributing Education among the Less Advantaged: A Problem for Principles of Justice?," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 31, no. 1 (2014): 109–134, for a detailed discussion of deficiencies in the ways that various principles, including educational adequacy, have been articulated in the recent philosophical literature.