

A Meditation on Merit

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In “Precarious Meritocracy,” Liz Jackson and Charles Bingham offer a valuable admonition that we attend to the affective structure of merit in education. They pointedly remind us that we tend to be captives of a “best and brightest” mentality in our own work, articulate a view of affect built out of the work of Sara Ahmed and Megan Boler that counters the “dumb view” of feelings as lodged in and emanating from individuals, explore Ahmed’s conception of an “affect alien” to cast light on those whose affects are unruly and not fully disciplined, and then develop this experience as a positive step toward “revolutionary consciousness,” and ultimately, agency for students. I have two responses: 1) Yes! And 2) What about us?

Jackson and Bingham ask that we “support, rather than reject affect aliens in our midst.”¹ They make Herbert Kohl an example for the educator who “lets affect be a clue as to how to proceed.” I suggest we go one step further to let our own merit-provoked affect alien tendencies out to play and *then* to think about and through the feelings that mark those encounters when merit shapes the moment. This is difficult and often uncomfortable work.

We have been messing with merit since Plato wrote *The Republic*, inscribing merit into our imaginary about social organization. Plato’s delineation of an ideal – and ideally governed – society meant everyone in their place, a functional place determined by one’s metal/mettle. Only some merited the responsibility and lifestyle of the Ruler, while others were more suited to a different role, function, ... and type of education. Thomas Jefferson wrote a similar understanding into his “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge.”² Democratic visions demand broadly available education of some sort, true, but even democratic visions took differences among persons as definitive in recommending role and the preparation for that role.

So is merit nothing more than the sensible and presumably benign recognition that some of us are suited to specific social roles while others of us are not? On that reading, there must be some system of merit to tell us where we (and others) belong. Unless of course we don't. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, each woman decides her life's work, including whether or not she will mother. *Herland* is admittedly a utopia, but the idea that we might organize our social order based on *interest* is conceivable, at least to a woman.³ The difficulty of course – in Plato's time, in Jefferson's time and in our own – is that role and status (social as well as economic) go hand in hand.⁴ Merit is not a benign functional discourse but a tool for dispensing power, prestige, and privilege.

Think about your personal meritorious moments as a student, forgetting any functional analysis and bracketing any assumptions that make merit seem necessary to social order. Which stories shall we tell that might get us closer to the experience of merit, to its intelligibility, to understand why it feels positive or shameful; and why, for some, it feels incongruous or offensive or pointless?⁵ The difference between the person who experiences school-related merit as positive and the affect alien is that the former thinks that honors of this kind matter, and the affect alien suspects that they don't, at least not for anything of consequence. To experience educational merit positively is to accept the "given" that earning systemic honors reflects something valuable and educational. But therein lies the rub: Is education, rightly conceived, congruent with *any* conception of merit? The radical question is not whether our present system of schooling is equitable with respect to merit but whether it can be educational when merit is woven into the system?

Consider an experience where merit is less clear but capacity is more obvious, substantive, and developmental: the first time I prepared and delivered a 7-minute speech on a randomly assigned topic with 30 minutes of lead time; and the much later time when I could do that regularly with confidence and competence. This sequence of moments in a movement toward capacity led me to what might rightly be called "merit" – victories in extemporaneous speech competitions – but also to a useful professional skill. But the value –

and the deep satisfaction – of this process of personal growth over time germinated long before the completion of this growth brought recognition. The consequent merit attached to this case is educational artifice; that is, the merit is not about education at all but about something far less valuable.⁶ If we asked about the *value* of experiences of this kind, we could have a lively discussion. But if I ask about the *merit* associated with such experiences, it is more difficult to make sense of the question – at least from an educator’s perspective.⁷

Merit is a relational experience rooted in recognition by some authority of one’s (positive) worth relative to others on a specified dimension of performance. As Jackson and Bingham point out, merit *usually* carries an affective valence of pride and satisfaction, or, ironically, shame when the pride seems to be misplaced. Each part of this rendering is worthy of emphasis. First, merit is not equivalent to value, but requires explicit recognition of value. Second, merit is not self-authorizing; I cannot designate myself worthy of merit. The authority that does the recognizing may be personal or impersonal, but it is not me. Third, merit implies not just positive value but positive value relative to others. Merit generally implies not just good, but also better than, or perhaps best. Finally, merit presumes a performance domain. If I merit recognition, it is *for some reason* that is specifiable.

The most compelling argument for keeping merit in a system of public education probably comes from the mandate for what Gert Biesta calls “qualification,”⁸ and links back to Plato. Don’t we need to be able to weed out good doctors from bad ones, the argument goes? In fact, this is an empirical question for which we don’t have a definitive answer because our so-called meritocracy does not allow its thorough trial. Maybe Gilman is right. If status is separated out from role and if all persons are permitted to discern their own calling, seeking preparation for that calling, perhaps we would have many more and better doctors than we currently have.⁹

Persons, big or little, student or teacher, need to be seen, encouraged, and challenged to remain alive, growing, flourishing. Merit offers the experience of being seen, but as the experience of Richard Rodriguez illustrates, being seen in the wrong way for the wrong reasons can be shaming and shameful.

Merit might offer a crude kind of reinforcement for behaviors that are appropriate but it does not provide the encouragement, the infusion of courage, needed to persist in the face of work that is uncomfortable and unhappy. Merit puts a stop to constructive challenge, and therefore growth, because its message is “you have arrived.” For these reasons, I suggest Jackson and Bingham ask too little of us.

Yes, we can attend to affect, the affect that opens to alien experience, an experience that is by definition disruptive, in order to encourage constructive agency on the part of our students. But that will matter little unless we also teach all our students that pride in merit is not of value. Satisfaction in growth is the point of the work we do together. This is a differently directed affect and the crux of the social and emotional learning needed in any society that aspires to be democratic or any system that intends to be educational.

To accomplish this, we first have to model it as affect alienates ourselves in a system that screams at us to publish in the best journals, get the highest student evaluations, accept the most accomplished students – and whispers in our ears that our professional worth depends on the prestige of the institution with which we are affiliated. Then we will have to stop grading. I don’t mean don’t record grades in whatever electronic system you now employ. I mean stop telling students whether they are good enough and start teaching them how to tell if they are – and then let *them* make that judgment. Before you tell me that’s impossible, consider the substance of your objections. How many of those objections are in any way educational?

Ask, what are *we* feeling in the face of merit as a determination of the quality of our work? What about our agency? Where is *our* revolutionary consciousness?

1 Liz Jackson and Charles Bingham, this volume.

2 Available at: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0079>

3 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).

4 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) for one argument in support of this point.

5 I have in mind such experiences as making the Dean's List, being named Student of the Month in middle school, earning a National Merit Scholarship, or being admitted to a particular institution or program.

6 This becomes even more obvious when we move further afield to ask, What is the merit in developing the habit of respect for others as persons? What is the merit in acquiring the habits of mind that Ted Sizer founded the Coalition of Essential Schools around? What is the merit in appreciating the paintings of Caravaggio, the plays of August Wilson, or the music of Bob Dylan?

7 We do speak in everyday discourse about the *merits* of Bob Dylan as a poet, for example. However, this seems to me to shine light not on what is better or best, but what is of value in the work.

8 Gert Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2010).

9 I would note, by the way, that we seem generally unworried about identifying, recruiting, and actually preparing good teachers. Why do we only care about keeping folks out of high status, white male dominated professions? Is that an accident? Or a plan?