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MERITOCRACY RECONSIDERED THROUGH ARISTOTLE'S VIRTUE ETHICS

ABSTRACT

The categories of merit and meritocracy have received a lot of attention by political philosophers, especially during the second half of the 20th century. They appeal to merit as a criterion of legitimacy to rethink the distribution of wealth and resources in our society. From a superficial perspective, meritocracy is presented as open competition based on personal qualities and effort to determine how rewards are distributed. It is often seen as highly attractive and intuitively fair.

In this article, we intend to analyze whether contemporary meritocracies help citizens to develop themselves, to be better citizens and better persons, to be more virtuous and to fulfill themselves, or, on the contrary, these meritocracies lead citizens to become less virtuous and therefore worse individuals. Furthermore, by extrapolating what happens to individuals, we can consider how meritocracies impact institutions and societies as a whole.

For this purpose, we will draw on various philosophical perspectives, from Aristotle to the political thinkers of the 21st century. These authors offer ethical frameworks connecting the good life of the individual with personal and social development.

Meritocracy may appear to emphasize the achievement of excellence by individuals, making it seem like a good match for virtue ethics. However, this article argues that Aristotelian virtue ethics is actually at odds with the raw meaning of contemporary meritocracies and may also lead to a society which is not cohesive, which is also contrary to the notion of a virtue society for Aristotle.

KEYWORDS

Virtue, Institutions,
Common good,
Distributive Justice

Introduction

The main feature of meritocracy is that a person's position in society is determined not by origin, affiliation with a particular group, or financial status, but exclusively by individuals' abilities and achievements. In a meritocratic society,

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individuals will supposedly strive to improve their position by the acquisition and the achievement of those goals which are held in high regard by the rest of the citizens. Originally, the term “meritocracy” was introduced by the book “The Rise of Meritocracy” (Young 1958), where he saw that the distribution of wealth, jobs, and power in the future society, based on merit would correspond to each individual’s actual intelligence and effort (cited in Cho et al. 2023:1). Thus, meritocracy acts as a justification where individuals’ worth and talent is the main determinant of their successes and failures. Critics argue, however, that contemporary meritocratic systems promote income inequality, and this inequality is often interpreted as an individual rather than a societal problem (Cho et al. 2023:6). Surveys across 34 countries between 1987 and 2019 revealed that meritocratic beliefs are associated with income inequality (Cho et al. 2023:6). Thus, addressing the challenges brought by meritocratic beliefs is complex and includes promoting collective goals, collaboration that focuses on social responsibility and raising awareness about external factors that impact on the success of the individuals (Cho et al. 2023:6).

Mulligan (2022:18) states that, historically, meritocracy has been understood in two ways. First, it is connected with the approach to governance, where leaders are selected on the basis of merit and will benefit society. The roots of this understanding lie in Confucius and is defined as “Eastern Meritocracy.” Second, meritocracy is understood as a theory of justice, where the distribution of social goods happens according to individual excellence and has its roots in Aristotle, and it is known as “Western Meritocracy”. Contemporary meritocracy, by contrast, often understands social rewards – wealth, status, and recognition – as ends in themselves. This absolutization of merit, rather than merit *per se*, generates the moral and social concerns discussed in this article.

While Aristotelian meritocracy is compatible with virtue ethics, contemporary meritocratic systems, which elevate individual success and material rewards to ultimate ends, often appear to be in tension with the cultivation of virtue and the promotion of social solidarity.

Methodology

This article is structured in two parts. The first briefly describes meritocracy and analyzes its application in contemporary Western society. The second examines the extent to which meritocratic systems, both Aristotelian and contemporary forms, promote the full development of citizens and contribute to strengthening institutions.

To pursue these objectives, three types of sources were used. First, for the initial part of the article, recent studies (published since 2020) that analyze and critique contemporary meritocracy were consulted. Likewise, some sources published after *The Rise of Meritocracy* (Young 1958), the moment when the term was coined, were considered in order to better clarify and contextualize its meaning. Second, for the latter part of the article, various works by Aristotle were employed, as the aim is to compare Virtue Ethics with meritocratic

proposals. Finally, some contemporary sources that refer to Aristotle's theses in the current debate were also included.

Main body

Observation of the existence of Meritocratic societies

In discussing meritocracy, the main question lies in how 'merit' is being measured, since it affects the life of people. According to Mulligan (2022:34-35), Western Meritocracy is more convincing, since giving people what they deserve on the basis of their merit promotes good consequences by providing meritorious people the good that they deserve. This entails a distributive approach, where justice is a crucial part of morality. Eastern Meritocracy points to the possibility that distribution of goods sometimes is done unjustly, not on the basis of merit, which would be particularly notable in the political context. Though, the difference in focus, history and conceptual definition must be taken into account between Eastern Meritocracy and Western Meritocracy (Mulligan 2022:35).

Meritocracy leads to a situation where citizens are treated unequally by their fellow citizens. Therefore, even if everyone supposedly has the same chances to succeed, the divide between winners and losers is apparent. Modern meritocracy could be associated easily with the image of a competitive race, where successful people believe that they have earned their success and benefits that come with it. So, paradoxically, when we attain true equality of opportunity, it seems more plausible to those who succeeded and to those who struggle that the winners achieved their success and deserve their rewards (Sandel 2021:2).

Meritocracy rewards the meritorious with more resources, thus attaining social efficiency and justice. The increase of meritocracy in society apparently is the institutional consequence of implementing progressive humanism, which is an ideal-type of worldview that promotes harmonious individual achievements and social contributions. However, present-day meritocracy also represents self-defeating illusions, since even in practice, it only rewards conspicuous and wasteful displays of merit, rather than genuine contributions to society (Zhang 2024:1).

Criticisms made to meritocracy

Although meritocracy doesn't necessarily entail competition in all possible contexts, it often fosters competitive dynamics in social environments where rewards are limited, depend on a person's position, and have a social value. In these contexts, achieving high status, income, or recognition depends not only on developing one's abilities, but also on outperforming others. Therefore, merit is usually viewed more in relative rather than absolute terms. The logic of meritocracy thus becomes quite individualistic: success is attributed to effort and personal talent, while cooperation and shared responsibility

recede into the background (Von Platz 2022:21). Rather than promoting social solidarity, meritocratic systems under these conditions encourage individuals to continuously enhance their performance in order to secure or maintain a privileged position within hierarchical social structures. According to Sachs-Cobbe (2023:176-177), there are three clear objections to meritocracy in the USA and the UK. First, meritocracy can be criticized because of how it favors people who were born into wealth or in fortunate circumstances. Second, meritocracy can be criticized for the achievement it rewards, because such rewards are usually measured on the basis of income and status irrespective of the actual contributions to society. And third, meritocracy promotes extreme inequality with its challenging and socially destructive attitudes, specifically with arrogance among wealthy people and resentment among everyone else (Sachs-Cobbe 2023:177).

Sardoc (2022:137) claims that there are six issues linked to equality of opportunity that are largely taken for granted. For example, motivational – the reason behind giving equal opportunities to all individuals; procedural – defining those main elements in the process of distribution based on merit; genealogical-the description of the fair starting position to compete for an advantageous social position; substantive- defining the requirements for equalizing individuals' prospects; taxonomic – stating the type of disadvantage that is eligible for compensation and compensatory, defining the process of equalizing opportunities in practice. Each of these issues is addressed differently, based on the various conceptions of equality of opportunity (Sardoc 2022:137).

According to Mijs (2021:10), in societies with higher economic inequality, individuals tend to endorse meritocratic beliefs more strongly, since they might rationalize differences by associating success with individual effort and talent, thus by justifying the status quo and decreasing their cognitive dissonance in relation to inequality (cited in Tejero-Peregrina et al. 2025:2). Other studies have questioned this positive correlation, e.g. Bartram (2023:764) claims that the relationship between economic inequality and meritocratic beliefs could differ substantially, depending on other contextual factors, such as culture, politics and historical background; while Morris et al. (2022:423) found no clear link between income inequality and meritocracy in England (cited in Tejero-Peregrina et al. 2025:2). So, according to Tejero-Peregrina et al. (2025:2), the effect of economic inequality on meritocratic beliefs is hardly conclusive, since it is more about perception of inequality rather than inequality measured on the basis of those economic factors that most consistently determine economic inequality.

According to Zhang (2024:115), the belief in meritocracy has caused an increase in inequality, lowering of social mobility, indifference to poverty, and other social problems. In addition, he argues that there are two reasons why meritocracy is associated with conspicuous waste. The first is connected with the assessment of achievements and social contributions (2024:119). For instance, honesty positively affects economic development, but it is impossible to monitor how economic returns are linked to a person's honesty. Another

example is the role of creativity in scientific progress, yet the failure rate of scientific discoveries is high, and the contributions of scientists who failed could be left hidden. Thus, by rewarding only visible achievements, meritocracy pushes individuals to focus only on observable outcomes and neglect meritorious personal traits and efforts that may not bring visible results (Zhang 2024:119).

Thus, it is hard to achieve a truly meritorious society unless we take into account that every individual has a different kind of merit and unless we understand individual differences would help to understand society better.

Discussion

Would an ideal meritocratic society be just and cohesive?

One of the most powerful and persistent criticisms of contemporary meritocratic systems – systems in which honor, status, and resources are distributed based on individual merit – is that they are grounded on an unrealistic and fundamentally flawed premise. In theory, meritocracies promise a fair society in which everyone, regardless of their background, can rise or fall depending on their talents, efforts, and achievements. But for such a system to work fairly, everyone should have to start on an equal level: they would need equal access to education, healthcare, social networks, financial resources, and opportunities to reach their potential. This would be something equivalent to what John Rawls proposes with his “Original position” experiment, according to which all citizens would enjoy the same rights and opportunities while acting under a “veil of ignorance” (Rawls 1971) – that is, without knowing their subsequent place in society. Furthermore, everyone would roughly have to have the same abilities and skills at the initial point. But in reality, this initial condition of equality not only does not exist, but is actually utopian. From birth, people are shaped by a wide range of circumstances over which they have no choice or control. The family we are born into, our country of origin, the quality of local institutions, and the economic and cultural capital that surrounds us, all play a determining role in our development. Similarly, biological factors, the so-called “genetic lottery”, determine our cognitive ability, physical health, and other innate traits that can significantly affect a person’s capabilities, even in a merit-based system (Pojman 1997:551). As a consequence of these differences, some people are naturally and structurally better positioned to succeed, regardless of the efforts of others. This reinforces inequality under the appearance of fairness. The problem is not just that equality of opportunity is rare; the deeper problem is that it is conceptually illusory. It is unattainable because the conditions that would make it possible – the universal sameness in the background of ancestry, environment, and biology – do not and cannot exist (Cowen 2021: 362). Thus, meritocracies often end up legitimizing inequality rather than reducing it by presenting outcomes as deserved when, in fact, they may reflect unearned advantages.

Michael Sandel emphasizes something he finds even more frustrating for those who see themselves far from success: the meritocratic ideal can mask privileges and make structural injustices invisible by suggesting that those who succeed are more deserving simply because they have achieved it. This leads not only to social stratification, but also to moral complacency, where winners feel justified in their status, and losers feel guilty for their failures. Therefore, while meritocracy often seems like a fair and rational alternative to nepotism or aristocracy, it presents the risk of reproducing many of the same principles, now disguised as respect and responsibility (Sandel 2020:21).

This brings us to a key question in this article: Even if there was a society where all citizens started with the same opportunities, possibilities, education, benefits, etc., it would be worth considering whether a meritocratic system necessarily made that society the best it can be. In other words, even if we were able to eliminate all the structural and biological barriers that truly impede the equal distribution of opportunities, if everyone were on the same level, would a fully meritocratic system lead to the forging of better citizens and stronger institutions? This consideration goes beyond matters of equity and calls for a more profound examination of the society we aim to construct. It requires to consider not merely whether meritocracy as currently practiced is fair, but also whether it is desirable. Does such a society, based solely on the evaluation of individual merit, promote civic virtue, empathy, cooperation, and social solidarity? Or, on the contrary, does it promote hypercompetition, individualism, and a focus on personal achievement?

In a meritocratic system, it is assumed that those capable of working harder and better would consequently be higher in society, and that following this logic would lead to a more efficient and effective society. But we must ask ourselves what kind of citizens such society fosters. If citizens are educated to view life as a competition where rewards go only to the most talented and hard-working individuals, these citizens may come to view their fellow citizens more as rivals than as neighbours. Furthermore, those who receive rewards in a meritocratic society may come to believe that success is entirely their own doing, increasing their arrogance and lack of compassion for those who, despite their efforts, fail. On the other hand, those who do not achieve their goals may simply blame their failure on themselves, without questioning structural social deficiencies.

An additional issue for consideration is the definition of “merit.” In most meritocracies in the modern world, merit is defined in terms of academic results, technical skills, productivity, or earnings (Barrera 2023:4). However, although these qualities are positive, are they really the qualities we most desire in our citizens and our leaders? Where does that leave moral character, creativity, emotional intelligence, not to mention commitment to the common good? All of these are essential characteristics for the health of a society that defines itself as democratic and for the institutions that strengthen it. And it is not easy to quantify or reward these qualities, as if they were merit.

A meritocratic citizen may possess many virtues yet not be truly virtuous

According to what has been explained in the previous section, even if an initial starting position with equal opportunities for all were possible, a meritocratic society would not ensure the education of its citizens and institutions in values that sustain a just, humane, and cohesive society. This raises a deeper philosophical question: could it be that the ideal of current meritocracy is not only unattainable, but also flawed in its very conception? Is meritocracy good for humankind and society?

According to Aristotle in his *Ethica Nicomachea* (EN), human beings pursue different types of goods, each of which may present itself as desirable in its own way at different times in life. Not all goods have the same value or deserve to be pursued in the same way, and not all goods contribute in the same way to the development of the person, to human happiness, or, as Aristotle would say, to achieving *Eudaimonia*.

In order to analyze, in this article, whether meritocracy can lead human beings to be better citizens, to be happier, and to make institutions serve the common good, we consider that an analysis based on Aristotle's virtue ethics is especially appropriate, for the following three reasons:

a) Aristotle offers a teleological view of human life, in which the criterion of good is not external or arbitrary, but internal to the human being himself. Aristotelian ethics is grounded on a fundamental question: what is the proper goal of the human being? The answer Aristotle offers is «*eudaimonia*», that is, the happiness of the good life, the full development of the person achieved through the exercise of reason and virtue. This notion of *eudaimonia* allows us to evaluate systems such as meritocracy. The virtue ethics in Aristotle does not look for its effectiveness or formal justice, but for the capacity to promote the integral development of the human being (EN I.7, 1097a15–1098a20).

b) According to Aristotle, virtue is a habit acquired through action, not merely a moral theory. Virtue does not come naturally or through externally imposed rules, but is formed through the constant practice of good in everyday decisions. This idea is crucial for analyzing whether a prevailing model of a meritocratic system effectively fosters virtue in citizens or, on the contrary, rewards other forms of success that may be incompatible with moral excellence (such as individual ambition, excessive competitiveness, or utilitarianism) (EN II.2, 1103b26–1104a9).

c) Furthermore, Aristotle explains the existence of a close relationship between personal ethics and political organization, arguing that a just city is only possible if it promotes virtuous citizens. In his work *Politics* (2013, original 350 B.C.E), Aristotle affirms that the purpose of the polis is to enable its citizens to live well. Just as the individual achieves his or her goal through virtue, institutions also have a virtue of their own: their ability to orient social life towards the common good (Dimić 2023:33). For this reason, Aristotle's arguments can help us evaluate whether a system like modern meritocracy promotes institutions that serve the community or that end up reproducing inequalities or vices disguised under the guise of merit and rewards (EN V.1-5, 1129b–1130a).

Once we have explained the reasons why we will use Aristotle's virtue ethics to study the desirability of meritocracy, we will begin by defining where the good of man lies for our author.

Aristotle makes an important distinction between goods that are ends in themselves and ends that are merely instrumental, that is, that serve other, ulterior ends. For example, a life filled with pleasures might seem very attractive to many, but Aristotle argues that such a life reduces human existence to the level of beasts (EN I.5, 1095b14–1096a5). Pleasures are part of human life, but they are not the highest good for human beings, because they are not characteristic of what defines the human essence: the rational faculties. Similarly, the pursuit of wealth and material goods cannot be the ultimate goal of human beings. Riches, by their own nature, are not desirable in themselves, but rather as a means to achieve other ends, such as comfort, greater security, or influence. Grounding the purpose of our life in wealth would overturn the proper order of values and mistake the means for the ends.

Aristotle explains that honors, which many people consider desirable as a sign of social recognition and respect, by their very essence, are judgments that depend on others, not on the recipient. Honors, therefore, are bestowed and not self-generated by the possessor, and are therefore beyond the individual's control. A person can be virtuous without this virtue being honored by anyone. Conversely, a person can be honored through false manipulation of their own image. This turns honor into an inconsistent and unreliable good, insufficient to lead to a virtuous and prosperous life.

After arguing that pleasures, riches, and honors are not the ends of human life, Aristotle maintains that the only good entirely desirable in itself for human beings must be a good that is in accordance with human nature, and this good can only be a life guided by reason: a life governed by the growth of intellectual and moral virtues.

What differentiates human beings from other beings in the universe is our soul's capacity to act according to reason. The highest form of human development, of fulfillment of the person, or in Aristotle's words, *eudaimonia*, is not found in external goods such as pleasure, resources, or fame, but in the exercise of virtue, specifically the intellectual and moral virtues (Adkins 1960:343). The rational life has two components: practical knowledge and moral behavior. With these two components, we can harmonize our desires with reason and direct our actions toward the true good. Unlike pleasures or honors, which are temporary and depend on external factors, the virtuous life is inherent to the person, and it is lasting, and it is founded on the excellence of the individual's soul.

From these paragraphs, we conclude that, in the Aristotelian perspective, the rational life is not only the highest good, but also the only way to realize the potential inherent in human nature. It is the life proper to human beings and the most worthy of being pursued (EN X.7, 1177a23–1178a8).

A comparison between the qualities required by meritocracy and the virtue in Aristotle

As a working hypothesis, we could argue that meritocracy, in principle, is the system of distribution of honors, goods, and opportunities that best fits the Aristotelian ideal of the virtuous life. In fact, in Aristotle's virtue ethics, the ultimate goal of human beings – *Eudaimonia*, or individual flourishing – is achieved through the cultivation and practice of virtue. If we take this ultimate goal as a guide, then a society that encourages its citizens to develop personal qualities and rewards them for it, might appear not only to be a just society, but also to be one that morally educates its citizens. Understood in this way, a properly functioning meritocracy might appear to be a mechanism that rewards excellence not simply in terms of talent or achievements, but also in terms of virtues, such as the habits and dispositions that make those achievements possible. That is, society encourages individuals to act virtuously because success in this meritocratic system depends on virtues such as discipline, perseverance, honesty, and fairness (Graafland 2010: 2).

For example, to obtain a good job, one that provides not only a good salary but also social recognition and personal fulfillment, an individual should have a good academic record. But a good academic record requires cultivating certain habits, such as consistent work, a certain intellectual interest, learning work processes, following standards, etc. These habits could be included in the Aristotelian conception of *dianoetic* and *ethical* virtues, or intellectual and moral virtues. These virtues are acquired through the repetition of actions under the guidance of reason. A student who learns to work when there is no gratification, to strive even when there is no reward, and to act fairly and honestly when no one is observing, will not only improve their academic record but will also develop a virtuous personality (Carvalho 2022:504). In this sense, a meritocratic society could function not only as a fair method of distributing opportunities, but also as a school of virtues, a school that guides individuals toward the lifestyle proposed by Aristotle, the lifestyle proper to rational beings.

Moreover, in a true meritocracy, rewards would not be given arbitrarily or based on privileges, but rather based on acquired excellence. This reinforces the view of Aristotle that honor and recognition are more authentic when they correspond to virtue and achievement, rather than to birth conditions or fortune. If a society were able to align incentives with the cultivation of virtues, rewarding not only the outcomes but also the effort made to achieve them, it could create an environment for citizens where they feel motivated to live according to reason and virtue. Of course, we are assuming a version of meritocracy without corruption or social inequality, conditions that are seldom observed in societies today. But considering the hypothesis that meritocracy can serve as a bridge between distributive justice and ethical education is very attractive. This suggests that political and economic systems need not be morally neutral, but can be structured in ways that foster the growth of virtues and enable citizens' personal development.

Objections to this hypothesis

Once we have observed certain possible coincidences between a contemporary meritocratic society and Aristotle's virtue ethics, we will present three important objections that can be raised against the hypothesis that this kind of meritocratic society can be considered the most appropriate one for fostering a life of virtue in individuals and institutions.

1) First objection: the nature and origin of intellectual virtues.

The first objection concerns the nature and origin of intellectual virtues and how they relate to justice and opportunity within the framework of meritocracy. Many claim that thriving in a meritocratic society requires citizens to cultivate and apply intellectual virtues. Achievement is often linked to traits such as diligence, critical thinking, curiosity for learning, and the ability to excel in various areas, particularly in academic life. In universities and schools, intellectual effort receives formal recognition through grades, diplomas, scholarships, admission offers, and even job prospects. From the standpoint of meritocracy, such rewards are meant to acknowledge both the significance of what has been accomplished and the dedication involved in acquiring the relevant knowledge and abilities.

Aristotle, however, maintains that intellectual virtues do not arise solely from effort or discipline. While an important component of intellectual virtue is clearly learning, which is actively acquired through study and practice, Aristotle emphasizes that intellectual excellence is also a matter of natural endowments (Adkins 1960:342). Some people are simply better equipped for reasoning, comprehension, memorization, or creativity, among others, and these abilities are not totally acquired through merit, but are given to us at birth. In other words, the cultivation of intellectual virtues depends in part on personal effort, but in part on innate ability (EN II, 1103a).

And this raises a first objection to the contemporary meritocratic ideal. If success in a meritocratic society depends largely on intellectual achievement, but intellectual ability is unequally distributed and it is in part a received gift, then the playing field is not equal. Even if two citizens strive equally, the one with a naturally superior intellectual ability may surpass the other, not because of virtue, but because the two have different natural endowments (Markovits 2019:66). This criticism is again what John Rawls refers to when he uses the term "genetic lottery", highlighting the differences in talents each person receives at birth. He argues that it is unfair to base life success on factors over which individuals have no control, such as natural abilities or the circumstances in which one is born. Furthermore, these intellectual advantages are often reinforced by environmental and societal factors: access to the best schools, parental education, cultural capital, stable family conditions, and other privileges. All of these elements influence a person's intellectual development, but they are not under that person's control. As a result, meritocratic societies end up equating natural advantages with merit by rewarding not only effort but also

inherited talents and social position. This undermines the ethical justification for rewarding merit and, at the same time, calls for a rethinking of the idea that meritocracy fosters virtuous living. Instead of promoting justice, meritocracy can unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities, while still appearing fair.

2) Second objection: an instrumental understanding of virtue.

Aristotle's concept of virtue is not instrumental; it does not have the value of a means to an end; it is not something cultivated with the intention of receiving rewards such as money, fame, or power. On the contrary, virtue is something sought for its own sake. A virtuous life, a life lived according to reason, a life with the habitual practice of moral and intellectual excellence is a life of achievement and represents the highest level of human flourishing, or *eudaimonia*. In this sense, virtue is in itself its true reward: it perfects human nature and leads to a life that is both morally good and genuinely happy.

In contrast to this concept of virtue, modern meritocratic societies tend to offer different motivations. In these societies, individuals are encouraged to give everything they have got, to be competitive, and to improve themselves in order to obtain a series of rewards such as good status, good earnings, career advancement, good academic credentials, and public recognition. While these rewards are often associated with virtues such as diligence, honesty, perseverance, and justice, they are actually external to virtue. As a result, there is a great risk that individuals in meritocratic societies will begin to interpret virtues primarily as a means to an end. That is, individuals may acquire good habits not because they are worthwhile in themselves, but because they believe these habits lead to success within such systems.

But this shift in motivation has profound ethical implications. When virtue is instrumentalized, when it is used as a strategy for personal gain, it ceases to be true virtue in the Aristotelian sense. A person may behave in society in an acceptable or admirable way, but their actions may lack a proper moral orientation. Aristotle differentiates between continent individuals, who do the right thing despite conflicting desires, and virtuous individuals, who desire the good for its own sake (EN VII.1, 1145a15–1145b15). A meritocratic culture, with a strong emphasis on rewards and recognition, can produce many well-disciplined, law-abiding individuals whose true motivation is self-interest rather than a genuine love of what is good.

Furthermore, when rewards and prizes constitute the primary motivation for virtuous behavior, the system can generate cynicism and moral calculation. People may be encouraged to comply with ethical norms only when it is advantageous to themselves, or when they feel they are being watched by others. This undermines the development of an individual's moral character, which Aristotle regards as essential to both human happiness and the proper functioning of the political community. To sum up, when there is a direct relationship between virtue and reward, meritocracy jeopardizes the very virtues it proposes, potentially turning them into instruments of progress rather than ends in themselves (Sinnicks 2021:270 – 271).

3) Third objection: success as a false endpoint in the cultivation of virtue.

As the main objective of a meritocratic society is the fair distribution of wealth and honor, and social rewards based on each person's effort and abilities, in some contemporary meritocracies citizens could understand that virtue has value insofar as it leads to success. In this context, happiness cannot be understood as Aristotle conceives it: the flourishing of the rational soul through a virtuous life, but rather as the attainment of better conditions, status, and social position. A possible risk could be that individuals will cease their pursuit of virtue once they have achieved a satisfactory level of success and a good social standing. Although this objection is not inherently linked to the theoretical concept of meritocracy, it can be observed in practice in some contemporary meritocratic societies.

Sandel observes (2020:37) that in many contemporary meritocratic societies, successful people often attribute their success solely to their own merits, fostering a "meritocratic arrogance" that can overshadow other moral virtues that are not directly affected by external rewards. From this perspective, once a certain level of status or recognition is achieved, the motivation to continue cultivating virtues such as humility, solidarity, or commitment to the common good tends to diminish, since external success is now interpreted as sufficient proof of virtue.

If people are virtuous only because they seek a reward, be it wealth, recognition, or prestige, then once those rewards have been secured, the motivation to continue developing by cultivating good habits will naturally diminish. Effort becomes unnecessary once the reward has been achieved. Thus, a society that views virtue simply as a tool for achieving success risks producing individuals who abandon intellectual and moral growth once their material goals are met. Instead of producing citizens who aspire to moral excellence in their lives, meritocracy can lead to complacency, mediocrity, and cynicism (Graafland 2010:5–11).

Furthermore, if the typical rewards associated with excellence and achievement, such as wealth, property, and respect, can be obtained through other methods, then these methods may be considered equally valid or even preferable to virtue. For example, if owning a home is a symbol of success, and success is considered a value in society, then the difference between being able to buy a home after many years of effort and work, or buying the home with money won as a lottery prize, is irrelevant. In both cases, society will view equal success with the same admiration, since the result of both processes is the same.

In such a society, the cultivation of virtue loses weight, yet indicators of success gain importance, regardless of the means used to attain them. The result could be a culture in which apparent success replaces a deeper and more sustained pursuit of moral and intellectual excellence. Thus, meritocracy, far from being a safeguard of virtue, puts it at risk by distorting its very essence, by replacing "being good" with "looking successful."

Final considerations on the three objections

While meritocracy is often proposed as a fair and rational system for distributing honors, resources, and opportunities based on personal effort and talent, in some contemporary meritocracies it entails significant risks when individual reward becomes the dominant social ideal. The greatest danger lies in the fact that meritocracy, if not grounded in a deeper ethic, can lead citizens to value virtue less in itself and more in the external rewards it can bring. If the true ideal of a meritocratic society is not to cultivate intellectual and moral excellence in itself, but rather to foster merit as a basis for other achievements, the structure of that society begins to corrupt (Güremen 2018:174). In such a society, virtue is reduced to a means to other ends, useful only insofar as it provides some kind of reward.

Such an instrumental view of virtue can lead to a form of society in which material success becomes the primary criterion for evaluating the individual and the good life. Intellectual and moral virtues, those habits that are essential to human flourishing in Aristotle's ethics, are no longer sought for their intrinsic value, but only because they serve for achieving other goods. Once the level of comfort and desire has been reached, the incentive to continue growing in virtue diminishes, and good habits lose their appeal. Such a form of meritocracy can end up producing citizens who are more concerned with accumulating goods than with being good citizens. Furthermore, people's happiness in this type of society becomes dangerously dependent on what they possess, rather than on what they are or what they have become. This kind of society runs the risk of encouraging its citizens to measure their own worth and the worth of others not by their honesty, intelligence, or character, but by their wealth, credentials, job, titles, and recognition. This approach diminishes the concept of virtue as a stable quality of the soul, and replaces it with a superficial and contingent image of success. Citizens may understand that what is valuable is not what comes from a person's moral development, but from how they are perceived by others, regardless of whether this perception is true or not (Morrell and Dahlmann 2022: 622–623).

Thus, the paradox of contemporary meritocracy is that, while it promotes the rewarding of virtue, it actually weakens the foundations on which virtue rests. By linking personal excellence to superficial success, meritocracy falls into the trap of turning moral life into a competition for rewards rather than a path to authentic personal development. In this way, meritocracy can create a society that is materially prosperous but at the same time spiritually impoverished – a society in which individuals have plenty but are personally empty.

A society that lacks solidarity is not a virtuous society: meritocracy and the institutional erosion of virtue

A wider and more contemporary view of the limits of meritocracy, and more broadly of the ethical foundations of modern capitalist societies, appears in

the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. In his influential critique of modern ethical thought, more specifically in his work *After Virtue* (1981), MacIntyre attempts to recover and update the Aristotelian concept of virtue, clarifying not only its nature and forms, but also outlining the conditions necessary for cultivating virtues in society and institutions. According to MacIntyre, virtues are qualities that enable individuals to attain the intrinsic rewards of particular activities, such as art, education, politics, or science, through sustained practice and dedication. These inherent benefits are the excellence and integrity of the activity itself, not any external rewards that may go with it.

MacIntyre's theory offers a strong critique of capitalism and meritocracy. In modern capitalist societies, and especially in competitive meritocratic systems, virtues are often misrepresented or displaced into what Aristotle might consider vices. The most important of these vices is pleonexia, a Greek term used to define a vice contrary to distributive justice, in which one desires a larger share than is equitable (EN V). Though Aristotle and Aquinas see pleonexia as a moral flaw reflecting a deficiency in temperance and moderation, MacIntyre observes that modern capitalism has transformed this vice into an admirable trait (Knight, 2025). Ambition, acquisitiveness, and the relentless pursuit of success are now seen not as acceptable qualities, but as admirable ones. They are often understood as indicators of strength, productivity, and leadership.

This reversal of values and the way we understand and practice morality gives us an insight into the profound shift taking place in society's mentality. Capitalist meritocracies tend to prioritize goods external to the individual – money, prestige, power – over the inherent goods that come from cultivating and practicing virtues (Graafland 2010:12–13).

As a consequence, people are motivated to develop habits not for their own inherent value or the pursuit of excellence, but rather as tools to attain other advantages. For example, education tends to be perceived less as a process of personal and intellectual development and more as a tool for acquiring qualifications, gaining employment, or facilitating social advancement (Carvalho 2022:504).

MacIntyre warns that when a society prioritizes rewards over the good habits cultivated by individuals, citizens' behavior deteriorates and institutions lose their moral grounding (Sinnicks 2021:271). This degradation leads to the loss of the virtues necessary for the functioning of community life and the common good. Instead of fostering moral character and wisdom, this system rewards outcome-driven calculations, efficiency, and individual progress. In this way, the meritocratic ideal eliminates the notion of virtue as understood in the classical tradition. Thus, MacIntyre's critique supports the previous concerns regarding meritocracy: when virtue is no longer pursued for its own sake, and when the appearance of success is valued above all else, we risk creating a world in which virtue is no longer cultivated, but commodified and ultimately lost.

Conclusions

Contemporary meritocratic systems tend to construe virtues as instrumental means for the attainment of material goals, rather than as good habits that enable individuals to develop as persons, live good lives, and achieve happiness. Thus, the purpose of meritocracy is not to make people more virtuous, but rather to make them more deserving or worthy of quantifiable reward. In this way, meritocracy appropriates virtues in order to differentiate individuals from one another, rather than to form them into better human beings.

By contrast, Aristotle's virtue ethics conceives of virtue as a type of excellence that allows human beings to flourish and to attain happiness. Honesty, generosity, courage, and other virtues are not, nor are they intended to be, subordinated to any ulterior end on the part of those who acquire them. Rather, through the cultivation of virtue, individuals achieve eudaimonia – the happiness proper to a life well lived.

The social divisions produced by the prevailing form of meritocracy – whereby those who possess merit are rewarded and those who lack it are humiliated – engender distrust both among citizens and toward institutions. Once trust is eroded within society, it is not merely interpersonal trust that collapses, but institutional trust as well. Institutions constitute the fundamental pillars of any society; they are what sustain us as a community. Without trust, institutions such as security, health, and education begin to deteriorate. Contemporary meritocracy, in privileging individual advancement, neglects the maintenance of social institutions and thereby exacerbates individualism among citizens.

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Preispitivanje meritokratije kroz Aristotelovu etiku vrline

Apstrakt

Kategorije zasluge i meritokratije privukle su veliku pažnju političkih filozofa, naročito tokom druge polovine 20. veka. One se oslanjaju na zaslugu kao kriterijum legitimnosti u promišljanju raspodele bogatstva i resursa u našem društvu. Iz površne perspektive, meritokratija se predstavlja kao otvoreno takmičenje zasnovano na ličnim kvalitetima i trudu, kojim se određuje način raspodele nagrada. Često se smatra veoma privlačnom i intuitivno pravednom.

U ovom članku nastojimo da analiziramo da li savremene meritokratije pomažu građanima da razvijaju sebe, budu bolji građani i bolje osobe, postanu vrlji i da ostvare svoje potencijale, ili, nasuprot tome, da li ove meritokratije vode građane ka tome da postanu manje vrlji, a samim tim i lošiji pojedinci. Nadalje, ekstrapolirajući ono što se događa pojedincima, možemo razmotriti kako meritokratije utiču na institucije i društva u celini.

U tu svrhu oslanjamo se na različite filozofske perspektive, od Aristotela do političkih mislilaca 21. veka. Ovi autori nude etičke okvire koji povezuju dobar život pojedinca sa ličnim i društvenim razvojem.

Meritokratija naizgled naglašava ostvarivanje izvrsnosti kod pojedinaca, zbog čega može delovati kao dobar spoj sa etikom vrline. Međutim, ovaj članak zastupa tezu da je aristotelovska etika vrline zapravo u suprotnosti sa sirovim značenjem savremenih meritokratija, te da one mogu voditi i ka društvu koje nije kohezivno, što je takođe suprotno Aristotelovom pojmu društva zasnovanog na vrlini.

Ključne reči: vrlina, institucije, opšte dobro, distributivna pravda

