THE MERITOCRATIC CONCEPTION OF EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY: IDEAL THEORY RUN AMUCK

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ABSTRACT. The dominant conception of educational equality in the United States is meritocratic: an individual’s chances of educational achievements should track only [natural] talent and effort, not social class or other morally irrelevant factors. The meritocratic conception must presuppose that natural talent and effort can be isolated from social class — and environmental factors in general — if it is to provide guidance in the world of educational policy and practice. In this article Kenneth R. Howe challenges that presupposition and related elements of the meritocratic conception having to do with the role of competition and education as a positional good. Howe argues that, in use, the meritocratic conception unavoidably distributes education based on developed talent and motivation that cannot be isolated from the effects of social class, thus masking the real basis of the distribution and contributing to the perpetuation of illicit group privilege. Howe then entertains and rejects several rejoinders to his critique, including that the meritocratic conception might eliminate the presupposition of isolatable natural talent. Finally, Howe sketches an alternative conception of educational equality based on Elizabeth Anderson’s adaptation of Rawls’s “democratic equality.”

The dominant conception of educational equality in the contemporary United States is meritocratic. Harry Brighouse succinctly delineates this conception as follows: “An individual’s prospects for educational achievement should be a function only of that individual’s effort and [natural] talent, not of his or her social class background.”

The idea of natural talents is fundamental to the meritocratic conception because differences in natural talents are seen as a source of justified inequalities. And, under nonideal conditions, at least, we could add other “morally irrelevant” characteristics to social class, race and gender being at the top of the list. Distribution based on talent and effort is not unconstrained, at least not for liberal egalitarians. Liberal egalitarians typically limit the level of permissible inequality with some prioritarian or leveling-up principle, Rawls’s “difference principle” being the most well known. Applying this principle, an individual with the natural talents associated with being a good physician may justifiably receive a better education and a higher salary if this arrangement most benefits those who are least well off. Conversely, the meritocratic conception sanctions foregoing equalization to satisfy other principles, such as parental autonomy. In general, then, the meritocratic conception is defeasible.

1. Harry Brighouse, “Moral and Political Aims of Education,” in Oxford Handbook to Philosophy of Education, ed. Harvey Siegel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 42. I have inserted “natural” as a modifier of talent because natural talent is what Brighouse intends, as opposed to developed talent. This is made quite clear in the paragraph immediately following the one in which the characterization of the meritocratic occurs, where Brighouse distinguishes natural from social advantages.
In this article I argue that the meritocratic conception of educational equality is a particular instance of ideal theory that is open to the kinds of criticisms that have been advanced especially by Charles Mills. In doing so, I will embrace and deploy Mills’s position, not elaborate or defend it. And my focus will be specifically on the meritocratic conception of educational equality, not the broader controversy about ideal theory.

I begin by challenging natural talent for being an ideal in Mills’s sense of an “idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual.” I argue that, as such, natural talent is a myth working hand in glove with an ideology in Mills’s sense of a “set of group ideas that reflect, and contribute to perpetuating, illicit group privilege.” My elaboration and defense of these two claims will unfold in two sections respectively titled “The Meritocratic Conception as Committed to the Myth of Natural Talent” and “The Meritocratic Conception as Ideological.” In the third section, “The Meritocratic Conception and Two Alternative Interpretations of the Role of Natural Talents,” I consider whether the meritocratic conception might avoid my criticisms, which are based on the presupposition that levels of natural talent possessed by individuals must be discernable, by interpreting the meritocratic conception either in a way that requires only a nondiscriminatory construal of natural talent — the normal range of human capacities — or in a way that dispenses with the appeal to natural talent altogether. I find neither of these ways of meeting my criticisms successful. In the fourth section, “Educational Equality Without the Myth: The Democratic Equality Conception,” I briefly sketch an alternative to the meritocratic conception based on an adaptation of Rawls’s democratic equality conception.

THE MERITOCRATIC CONCEPTION AS COMMITTED TO THE MYTH OF NATURAL TALENT

The meritocratic conception is suspect to the extent that its central idea of natural talent is suspect. And that the idea of natural talent is suspect — indeed, highly so — is just what I aim to establish in this section.

I realize that in challenging the idea of natural talent, I am up against a deep-seated, intuitively compelling belief that has survived since Plato and that has been the object of considerable scientific research. And there are surely cases in which the idea of natural talents, or “natural endowments,” as Rawls often

3. Ibid., 168.
4. Ibid., 166.

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calls them, seems ineluctable. Consider children with congenital anomalies, such as microcephaly, or those exposed to environmental toxins, such as lead. These children have biophysical attributes that are predictive of restricted levels of academic performance, and we might quite sensibly say their natural intellectual talents are limited. But we cannot infer from these special cases the universal claim that academic performance tracks some underlying level of natural intellectual talent associated with some inborn trait, or would if morally irrelevant factors didn’t get in the way. The inference turns on an exceedingly weak argument from analogy: that because in some cases biophysical factors are known to contribute to differences in academic performance, such causes must contribute to differences in academic performance in all cases.

The appeal to natural talent as the explanation of differential performance can also be challenged more directly, with evidence that nurture does much, much more to explain differences in performance than nature does, including in cases of individuals whose performance is so extraordinary that intuition strongly supports recourse to natural talent as the explanation. This is precisely the form of the challenge advanced by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers*. Using the examples of Mozart, Bill Gates, and professional hockey players, among others, Gladwell argues compellingly that rather than natural talent, it is practice (the 10,000 hour rule), social position, available opportunity, being in the right place at the right time, and other features of happenstance, that account for success in various endeavors.

Of particular interest from among Gladwell’s examples is his examination of psychologist Lewis Terman’s longitudinal study of the relationship between IQ and success. IQ has a long and controversial history in the distribution of education and continues to be used, for example, to identify “gifted and talented” children for sought-after educational opportunities and to identify other children for special education. In a longitudinal study initiated early in the twentieth century (and still ongoing) Terman identified approximately 1,500 school children with IQs exceeding 140, the “termites,” as they were called, and tracked them over their lives. Terman believed that IQ was a measure of natural intellectual talent that would produce a high degree of success in life. Much to Terman’s disappointment, his years of painstaking data collection revealed that IQ had little power to predict success beyond what family background alone could predict.

More specific to education than IQ is the concept of aptitude. Aptitude [or ability] tests purported to measure more specialized elements of the generalized intellectual talent that IQ tests purportedly measure. The use of aptitude tests to distribute education also engendered controversy. And although not nearly as much in the public eye as IQ tests, aptitude tests were also forcefully criticized for their inability to isolate natural talent in measuring and predicting academic performance.

In the 1980s, leaders in psychometric theory such as Anne Anastasi and Samuel Messick argued quite convincingly that educational tests could only measure developed talent, not natural or innate talent, because there is no effective way to isolate developed talent from motivation, previous opportunities, and how these interact with one another to produce measured performance. To the extent that natural talents exist, they can manifest themselves only under conditions favorable to their development. Thus, to the extent that they do exist, over time they become thoroughly melded with nurture — which, we now know, begins in the womb. Considerations such as these led the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to effectively endorse Anastasi and Messick’s view and to distance itself from any claims about measuring academic aptitude. In 1994, ETS changed the name of the “Scholastic Aptitude Test” to the “Scholastic Assessment Tests.” My colleagues in the field of educational measurement tell me that belief in aptitude as distinct from academic performance is now moribund.

The preceding considerations are not sufficient to decisively establish that natural talents do not exist. Moreover, certain contemporary psychological research purports to show that higher levels of performance track higher levels of talent at an aggregate level. I have my doubts about this research, but for my purposes here I am not required to establish the strong ontic claim that natural talents do not exist, period. I am only required to establish the weaker epistemic claim that purported measures of natural talent cannot accurately predict performance except in atypical cases. Thus, even if true, the findings regarding a relationship between natural talent and performance at the aggregate level are irrelevant to the distribution of educational opportunities. The distribution of measured levels of natural talents so overlaps with the distribution of measured levels of performance that no credible inference can be made in individual cases from a given level of natural talent to a corresponding level of performance.

The field of behavioral genetics provides no greater support for the idea of natural talent than do the fields of psychology and psychometrics. Some skeptics


argue it is time once again to “reinter” behavioral genetics, which continues to be resurrected from faulty and marginal thinking within the field, partly because it has such strong intuitive appeal to the public and policymakers.9 But even those who are more sympathetic to the project of behavioral genetics and remain optimistic about its potential for future contributions do not embrace genetic determinism, or anything close to it.10 Genetic influences are not conceived independent of their manifestations within the environment. The ultimate goal of behavioral genetics is to better understand how to enhance human development across genetically linked variation in predispositions, not to reconcile ourselves to what nature has ordained as unalterable.

Importantly, both the skeptical and more optimistic views on behavioral genetics reject the idea of tracking natural talent in the distribution of educational opportunities. To the extent that genetic information could have any application to distributing educational opportunity, which, at best, is a very long way off, its function would not be to identify natural talent and take measures to ensure that academic performance tracked it. Rather, it would be to design educational environments that would most enhance the development of talent for all.

Frances Horowitz provides an admonition to human development researchers that philosophers of education would do well to heed:

If we accept as a challenge the need to act with social responsibility then we must make sure that we do not use single-variable words like genes or the notion of innate in such a determinative manner as to give the impression that they constitute the simple answers to the simple questions asked by the Person in the Street lest we contribute to belief systems that will inform social policies that seek to limit experience and opportunity and, ultimately, development, especially when compounded with racism and poorly advantaged circumstances.11

THE MERITOCRATIC CONCEPTION AS IDEOLOGICAL

Wittgenstein remarked in the *Philosophical Investigations*, “a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it, is not part of the mechanism.”12 The conclusion that might be drawn from my argument so far is that the meritocratic conception simply has no application and, thus, has no effect on educational policy and practice. In this way, it is like Wittgenstein’s disengaged wheel. And taking the defeasibility of the meritocratic conception into account buttresses this conclusion. Except in relatively rare cases, each potential application of the meritocratic conception either rests on the untenable assumption that the

contribution of natural talent has been successfully isolated, as when IQ testing is used in admissions to gifted programs; or is overridden, as in affirmative action to further diversity.

But, in my view, this misses the mark, as my use of Horowitz’s admonition to end the last section may have signaled. I labeled natural talent a myth rather than an illusion for a reason. A myth may be defined as a “fiction or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology.” Plato’s “myth of the metals,” for example, fits this definition to a tee. Today, of course, we have genet- 
ics and IQ testing rather than the alchemy of the gods and performance assessment under the watchful eye of the guardians to account for and measure the natural talents that fix our limits before we are born. But natural talents are illusive. They have no manifestation independent of environmental influences; they function as unobserved posits used to explain differences in observed human performance.

As posits, natural talents fit quite comfortably within ideal political theory that, according to Charles Mills, “has served to rationalize the status quo.” Mills makes an explicit appeal to standpoint epistemology in suggesting how ideal theory came to be and why it is women, immigrants, and people of color for whom it prompts significant cognitive dissonance, not white males of European origin. It should tell us something that African American social critics from W. E. B. Du Bois to Derrick Bell to Lani Guinier have been pointed critics of educational testing, particularly as a purported measure of natural mental talent, while it is two white males of European origin, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, who pursued the most recent effort to justify racial hierarchy as tracking a natural hierarchy of talent.

We may safely assume that no meritocratic egalitarian would endorse Herrnstein and Murray’s thesis that natural talent is race-linked. A meritocratic egalitarian might even go so far as to reject the discernibility of levels of natural talent possessed by individuals altogether [a point I will come back to in my brief consideration of Rawls]. But the basic procedures for distributing educational opportunities spawned by the myth of natural talent remain in place and continue to exemplify patterns strongly associated with race and class. These include, as mentioned before, IQ testing for placement in special education and gifted programs, as well as placement in curricular tracking schemes based on

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teachers’ perceptions of students’ natural talent. Notwithstanding, most experts in educational measurement deny tests can make any claim to be measuring natural talent. And clearly other standard criteria of educational performance that are combined with test scores to assign merit — grade point average, teacher judgment, “grit,” and the like — can make no claim to being indicators of natural talent either. In the absence of any defensible method of isolating natural talent, some conception other than the meritocratic one must serve as the basis for the just distribution of education, whether to justify the current practices or some alternatives.

Or, so it would seem. Meritocratic egalitarians appear to be unaware of, or unmoved by, the tenuous epistemic status of natural talents. Rawls, for example, came to explicitly embrace the idea that there is no defensible method of isolating natural talent, but he did not abandon his meritocratic view as a result. By briefly examining Rawls’s evolving position, we can get a better understanding of what kind of things natural talents must be in the meritocratic framework. This will help shed light on how the meritocratic conception of educational equality is liable to the charge of rationalizing educational inequality.

In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls assumes that “the distribution of natural assets is a fact of nature and that no attempt is made to change it.” Among the things that count as natural assets are natural talents and natural endowments, physical and intellectual. These natural talents and endowments are social assets to be used for common advantage. Deviations from equality in the distribution of goods are permissible where they use natural talents and endowments to most benefit the least advantaged. This should all be quite familiar to an audience of philosophers. What I want to emphasize is that in *A Theory of Justice* the idea of natural talents as fixed — “a fact of nature” — is quite central to Rawls’s meritocratic conception of fair equality of opportunity, and there seems to be no significant change from this position in *Political Liberalism*.

In *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, however, Rawls provides a more nuanced characterization of natural talents. At the beginning of *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls seems to be retracing his steps from *A Theory of Justice* with assertions such as this: “[T]hose with the same level of talent and ability and the same willingness to use these gifts should have the same prospects of success regardless of their social class of origin.” But a few pages later he says,

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[N]ative endowments of various kinds (say, native intelligence and natural ability) are not fixed natural assets with a constant capacity. They are merely potential and cannot come to fruition apart from social conditions. Among what affects their realization are social attitudes of encouragement and support, and institutions concerned with their early discipline and use. Not only our conception of ourselves, and our aims and ambitions, but also our realized abilities and talents, reflect our personal history, opportunities and social position, and the influence of good and ill fortune.

Notice here that native endowments are not fixed, but merely potential and must be brought to fruition in the social world. Later in *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls draws out an important implication of this much more fluid conception of native endowments: “a usable measure of native endowments seems out of the question, even in theory.”

Rawls thus agrees here with my claim of the previous section that natural talent cannot be discerned in individual cases. But he draws no further conclusions about the broader implications of this, which leaves quite in doubt how the Rawlsian meritocratic conception might apply to the noisy, contingent, non-idealized world of educational policy. Because we can have no measure of native endowments — even in theory — the meritocratic conception is either altogether disengaged from the world of educational policy, which, I take it, would be fatal; or it supplies an idealized orientation that cannot be directly applied but that nonetheless somehow guides policy formation.

So, how might this work? The idealized orientation must remain committed to the existence of natural talents, despite their epistemic tenuousness. Otherwise, there would be no foundation for conceptualizing a just distribution of education in terms of a fair competition to bring natural talents to fruition. And natural talents must be presumed to have some nonmalleable core. Otherwise, they would lose all distinctiveness over time, due to “personal history, opportunities and social position, and the influence of good and ill fortune.” But this renders natural talents akin to things in themselves, standing behind observation but totally inaccessible to it. Alternatively, the idea of natural talents might be rescued by identifying a natural talent with a range of possibilities, as suggested by Rawls’s description of natural talents as “merely potential.” But this just takes us back to the argument from analogy that I dismissed earlier. We can specify a relatively restricted range of performance for people with certain discernable biophysical characteristics, but not for the vast majority of others. For the most part, natural talent is a will-o’-the-wisp that we cannot grasp concretely and use to explain differences in performance. In either case — will-o’-the-wisp or thing in itself — the idea of natural talent cannot play any role in the real world of educational policy. Or, I should say, it cannot play the role it is intended to by meritocratic egalitarians. Instead, as I suggested earlier, it functions within the

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21. Ibid., 158. Rawls makes this claim in the context of rejecting a head tax on the talented as a just principle of redistribution.
meritocratic conception to rationalize educational inequality. This happens in at least four ways.

First, the belief that natural talents underlie performance encourages a default explanation for unequal academic performance in schools: if we can identify no differences in nurture to explain these disparities, it must be unobserved differences in nature that explain them. This, in turn, reconciles us to stubborn educational inequality as a “fact of nature” that we can do nothing about. In educational practice, it provides the rationale for several practices referred to before.

Again, meritocratic egalitarians would deny that academic performance differences associated with race or gender can or should be explained by differences in nature. Therefore, when it comes to between group comparisons, their default explanation would be nurture. But at least with respect to differences within these groups, the default explanation must be invoked. Otherwise, if no assumption is made about natural talent being distributed unequally within groups and resulting in differential educational performance, it can be dispensed with altogether and nurture alone can be used to explain differences in educational performance.

So far my focus has been on natural talent, one element of the meritocratic conception. The other element is the willingness to exert effort (which I will hereafter shorten to “motivation”). It also needs to be problematized, for a second way in which the meritocratic conception helps rationalize — and reproduce — educational inequality results from its assumption that motivation can, like natural talent, be isolated and that children or their parents are to be held responsible for its development.

There should be a weaker attachment to the idea that motivation can be isolated from social and cultural factors than to the idea that natural talent can be so isolated. In addition to folk wisdom, sociologists have provided credible theories to explain the development of aspirations and the means of achieving them as a function of social class. Regarding education in particular, sociologists in the categorical tradition, which includes Pierre Bourdieu, Paul Willis, and Annette Lareau, have theorized social class in terms of a “cultural logic” to which parents and children of a given class conform that advantages or disadvantages them in navigating the norms and goals of educational institutions.22 Distributing children’s educational opportunities on the basis of their motivation to pursue what schools deem important thus serves to rationalize a process that coincides with, and reproduces, class-based educational inequality.23

22. This is described by Annette Lareau in various places in the main body and in Appendix B of her book Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

23. Brighouse, as well as Rawls, would disallow differences in effort that track social class to be the basis of distribution. The problem, given my reading of Lareau’s Unequal Childhoods, is that the willingness to exert effort cannot be isolated from social class except, arguably, in those few “beat the odds” cases. This, I would say, is a paradigm case of the exception proving the rule. Interestingly, despite this apparent contradiction, Brighouse cites Lareau’s book approvingly in his essay “Educational Equality and School
Who is responsible for children’s motivation? It is altogether out of place to assign it to children themselves, at least until they reach a certain level of maturity. Educators do not and should not simply defer to children’s lack of motivation in school and then let them suffer the consequences. As I have suggested elsewhere, we would not be treating six-year-old Susan fairly if we determined that she had insufficient merit to be taught to read because she had a preference for hopscotch over reading.24 It is educators’ responsibility to make efforts to develop children’s motivation to apply themselves in school or, as need be, to finesse their lack of it.

Still, the onus cannot be placed entirely on educators, especially when they are functioning within an institution conceived in terms of responding to and furthering individual merit. Thus, the responsibility for children’s motivation to perform well in school, or at least a large part of this responsibility, is often transferred to their parents.25 But the idea that when children lack motivation, it is because parents have failed to cultivate it is overly simplistic; it ignores the effect of incongruent cultural logics in disadvantaging some parents in their dealings with schools and in preparing their children to succeed in them. Moreover, to whatever extent parents might be justifiably characterized as failing, their children should not bear the consequences.

A third way in which the meritocratic conception helps rationalize — and reproduce — educational inequality is by encouraging an overestimation of the power of schools alone to reduce educational inequality. The commitment to the existence of natural talent, in combination with the assumption that it is equally distributed among social class groups, in combination with the fact that there exist significant achievement gaps among identifiable social class groups, implies that much natural talent must be latent in groups at the lower end of the gap. Schools are responsible for identifying and developing this talent26 such that the distributions of achievement across social class groups are the same or nearly the same and the achievement gap is thereby eliminated or significantly reduced. For this to be successful, it will also surely be necessary to provide a further education for those who need it in so-called “soft skills,” associated with the willingness to apply effort and the knowledge of where to focus it.


This approach may be the best we can do now and for the foreseeable future; and, if done right,\(^{27}\) it has the potential to yield modest positive outcomes. But that should not obscure the fact that it is fundamentally flawed. It rests on an additive or "gradational" framework in which natural talent and motivation are conceived as distinct factors that go into determining merit. The alternative to this approach is the kind of "categorical" approach described earlier, in which talent is developed in conjunction with the willingness to devote effort [again, to what schools deem important].\(^{28}\) A significant portion of this process occurs outside of schools and over an extended period of time. Those middle-class parents who exemplify the parenting style that Annette Lareau calls "concerted cultivation" expend considerable effort to nurture their children in a way that results in a more seamless and efficacious fit with the institution of schools than is achieved by many working-class parents and their children.\(^{29}\) And these parents are more prone to know how to intervene to further what they perceive to be in the interests of their children. In Lareau’s categorical approach, talents, the willingness to devote effort, interaction styles, and the like are melded by a cultural logic into a whole that cannot be separated into distinctive parts that can simply be added to one another. The strategy of having schools identify and develop latent talent in working-class children and then augment this with soft skills and other compensating measures is severely limited in its capacity to produce a significant improvement in educational equality beyond the barrier created by class-based cultural logics and associated inequality in social, cultural, and financial capital.

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.\(^{30}\) The ultimate rewards for winning the competition are employment, income, wealth, and other private goods. The competition is fair if only talent and effort determine the winners, not morally irrelevant characteristics of individuals such as social class background and the like.

Two previous points apply here. First, it is inappropriate to put children in competition based on their merits, for children cannot defensibly be held responsible for their talents and motivations and thus should not have their welfare

27. This means not depending on a rigorous standards/testing regime and school choice to fix the problem as in current U.S. educational policy initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top.

28. I borrow this distinction between "gradational" and "categorical" approaches from Lareau (see Unequal Childhoods, 30).

29. Lareau, Unequal Childhoods.

30. Brighouse, for example, asserts that although society is not literally a race, "our society is relevantly like a race. The distribution of the benefits of social cooperation is structured to reward those who do well and penalise those who do badly in competitions they have no feasible alternative to participating in" [Brighouse, “Educational Equality and School Reform,” 30]. Elsewhere, he asserts, "educational equality means at a minimum, that resources devoted to a child’s education should not depend on the ability of their parents to pay, or choose well among educational experiences, on the assumption that educational experiences will yield opportunities for the rewards distributed by the labour market.” See Harry Brighouse, School Choice and Social Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 122–123.
determined in this way. Second, a determination cannot be made as to whether a given educational performance tracks talent and motivation independent of social class. And unless this determination can be made, the judgment that talent and motivation alone are responsible for a given educational performance must be by default. Again, this reconciles us to stubborn educational inequality as a “fact of nature” that we can do little or nothing about. And I suspect this conception of things sits quite comfortably with those who have an edge in the competition due not to some raw talent and motivation, but to their class-based advantages.

I end this section with an important clarification. In challenging the ideas of natural talent and natural motivation, I do not mean to imply that developed talent and developed motivation are not relatively stable. Over time, children will develop relatively stable skills, abilities, likes and dislikes, and so on, that educators must take into account in designing and distributing differential educational opportunities. But the key here is that although stable, these things are not thereby innate or natural. Developed talents and motivation are not a fact of nature but products of the kinds of processes described by Gladwell and Lareau, in which human practices and institutions are strongly implicated. It follows that we cannot get off the hook for educational inequality by deferring to the inevitability of nature.

THE MERITOCRATIC CONCEPTION AND TWO ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE ROLE OF NATURAL TALENTS

I previously conceded the point that there is plausible evidence for the existence of natural talents at the aggregate level. But I then argued that this kind of evidence is not relevant to the question of how to distribute education among individuals, for whom it is too wildly imprecise, or among groups, for whom the distributions are too overlapping. But suppose the role of natural talent is not to decide what distributions to make among individuals or groups, but is reserved for flagging maldistributions that signal injustice. For example, assuming that natural talent is distributed in the same way across social, cultural, and racial groups, the observed achievement gap among them signals injustice. A “usable measure of native endowments” is not required to make this inference.31

The idea that inequality in distributions of developed talents across social, cultural, and racial groups flags possible injustice is intuitively attractive. However, it requires appealing to nothing more specific than the normal range of human capacities, which results in this version of the formula for flagging injustice: assuming that the normal range of human capacities is distributed in the same way across class and racial groups, the observed achievement gap among them signals injustice. This normal range of human capacities is an instance of the idea of natural talent only in the most attenuated, nondiscriminatant sense. The historical role of natural talent in education, including in the meritocratic conception of educational equality, has been to provide a means of differentiating among individuals so as to

31. This interpretation was pointed out to me by Emily Robertson.
justify providing them with different educational opportunities; and it requires a much higher degree of specificity to perform this function than can be provided by the idea of the normal range of human capacities.

Harry Brighouse, quite puzzlingly in my view, embraces a nondiscriminant construal of natural talents as a rejoinder to my characterization of natural talent in my essay “The Dominant Conception of Educational Equality: Ideal and Ideology”.

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 in success could not be explained by differences of talent, 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 with eye color. If everyone had blue eyes, eye color would play no explanatory role in anything. It would not follow, though, that eye color was a myth.

Recall that I do not advance what I call the strong ontic claim that talents do not exist. So, strictly speaking, I am not required to disagree with Brighouse’s claims in this passage. I advance the epistemic claim that purported measures of natural talent cannot accurately predict performance except in atypical cases, and thus natural talent cannot be defensibly used in approaching the distribution of education. But Brighouse adds that natural talents are not, in fact, equal, which is to say that natural talents can be given a more specific construal. He knows this on the basis of “common sense.” Nowhere does Brighouse broach my argument challenging the epistemic tenability of the specific construal of natural talent and, in turn, my reasons for calling it a myth.

A second alternative interpretation of the role of natural talents in the meritocratic conception goes one step further and just dispenses with them altogether. This alternative is also suggested by Harry Brighouse in his response to my “The Dominant Conception of Educational Equality: Ideal and Ideology,” though he does not himself jettison natural talent from the meritocratic conception.

The suggestion that the meritocratic conception can dispense with natural talents is very dubious. So long as such a conception retains the idea of a fair competition as the basis for distribution, which seems essential for it to be counted as “meritocratic,” it cannot be rendered tenable. Without recourse to natural talent, the grounds are missing for distinguishing morally objectionable differences in human performance and its rewards from morally acceptable differences. When natural talents are jettisoned, differences in human performance must be a product solely of the environment, good versus bad nurture, and other things for which developing children deserve neither credit nor blame, thus rendering putting them in competition with one another always unfair. Unless the fair competition

32. Howe, “The Dominant Conception of Educational Equality: Ideal and Ideology.”
34. Ibid.
framework is abandoned, the fix, it seems, is a thoroughgoing form of egalitarianism that would require equalizing the prospects of the competitors to an extent that would be both unattainable and undesirable. Indeed, Brighouse elsewhere blocks this “bottomless pit” problem by rejecting a “radical conception” of educational equality that would jettison natural talents from the distributive scheme. Alternatively, to avoid the bottomless pit problem, a meritocratic conception sans natural talents would have to be so defeasible as to be hollow.

Educational Equality Without the Myth: The Democratic Equality Conception

People develop differently, including with respect to durable talents: this is the “fact of nature” with which we must contend. We have, and ought to have, only limited control over this. From among these differences, it is those that lead to political inequality — to the “empowerment gap” — resulting in the domination of certain groups by others that can be labeled morally objectionable and that education should seek to eliminate.

Elizabeth Anderson has explored this vein of argument in some detail. Like me, she finds the meritocratic conception highly problematic. Unlike me, she does not challenge natural talents in a direct way; rather, she more or less brushes the issue aside. She describes her focus as “the asymmetrical distribution of human knowledge and talents ... based not on nature or genetics but on the epistemological consequences of social inequality.” She rejects Rawls’s ideal theory approach in favor of “constructing workable criteria of justice in educational opportunity for our currently unjust world,” but in a way that speaks to two Rawlsian insights: one, that human knowledge and talents should be conceived as public goods; and two, that they should be distributed so as to the benefit of everyone. She argues that the meritocratic conception cannot accomplish this because it is rooted in the politics of envy.

Anderson’s general view is typically associated with an adequacy, or threshold, or sufficientarian principle of distributive justice, as opposed to an

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35. I am assuming that motivation cannot be isolated from social and cultural determinants, and thus cannot serve as a criterion for justifying unequal distributions. This follows from my previous appeal to a categorical versus gradational sociological framework.


37. I think my direct approach has the advantage of making the need for an alternative more apparent. This is not meant as a criticism of Anderson.


equalization principle. This characterization is misleading.41 “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.”42 It is important to note that although equality is not required in the distribution of educational resources and opportunities, the level of permissible inequality in these respects is significantly constrained by the requirement of equal citizenship.

Democratic equality need not assume the existence of natural talent and motivation, which, I have argued, are required by the meritocratic conception in order to ensure that educational opportunity tracks these independent of social class, race, and gender. Democratic equality need only assume that, in general, human beings have the potential capacity to participate in effective democratic deliberation. It then requires that the conditions — social, cultural, political, educational, and economic — required for the development and practice of deliberative capacity be in place.43

Regarding the role of formal education, the capacity to effectively participate in democratic deliberation requires more than the cognitive academic skills and knowledge that the current K–12 curriculum so myopically focuses on in order to prepare students for their next competitions for higher education and the job market. Academic skills and knowledge alone are insufficient.44 Generally speaking, academic skills and knowledge are too abstract and disembodied to provide genuine access to the different life experiences from which different perspectives and “felt difficulties” derive. Academic skills and knowledge can be applied to practical problems only to the extent that difficulties have indeed been felt and broken through to consciousness. But much lies below consciousness, is habitual, and goes unchallenged, including various sources of bias.45 Those at the top of the advantage hierarchy proceed largely unimpeded, reproducing inequality. They are not necessarily overly self-interested or mean-spirited, but

41. In “On Equality versus Adequacy,” I distinguish between adequacy versus equality frameworks and adequacy versus equality principles to make a similar point.


43. Gutmann, especially in her book Democratic Education, has done the most to articulate the constraints within which democratic equality should be negotiated. See also Howe, Equal Educational Opportunity.

44. A comprehensive account is provided by Anderson in her article “Fair Opportunity in Education,” and in Elizabeth Anderson, The Imperative of Integration [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010].

45. Among these are stereotypes that tend to exaggerate between-group differences and minimize within-group differences, leading to erroneous judgments about individuals; attribution bias, the psychological tendency to attribute behavior to internal rather than external causes; system justification bias, the tendency to view the status quo as just and to attribute good internal characteristics to high-status individuals and bad internal characteristics to those of low status; and in-group favoritism and shared reality bias, both of which are pretty much self-explanatory. These concepts are taken from Anderson, The Imperative of Integration.
insular, cut off from the knowledge and skills they need to foster democratic equality.

Given this picture, certain kinds of knowledge, as well as ignorance, exist at both ends of the hierarchy of advantage. Closing the achievement gap by leveling up the bottom will not remedy the problem of democratic inequality and is unlikely to occur to any appreciable degree when addressed in isolation, solely in terms of what Anderson calls a “single hierarchy of cognitive development.” Rather, the work must encompass more than narrowly conceived cognitive development and be done from both ends of the spectrum Meira Levinson has labeled the “civic empowerment gap” from the end occupied by those who may be lacking negotiable social and cultural capital, as well as from the end occupied by those whom Anderson identifies as the democratically incompetent elite.

Working from both ends in this way, democratic equality does not have the compensatory thrust of a Rawlsian view tethered to natural talents, nor of popular conceptions of educational equality that adopt leveling up as the means of closing the achievement and soft skills gaps. And democratic equality takes a view different from the meritocratic conception on the much fussed about matter of education as a positional good. 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 his or her education, it increases that person’s 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 that the winners are determined solely on the basis of natural talent and motivation.

Our current system weakly approximates this ideal. I say “weakly” because natural talent and motivation must be posited; they cannot be culled from developed talent and motivation. Educational opportunities are, in fact, distributed on the basis of stable, but developed, talents and motivation. This rigs the competition in favor of members of advantaged groups. Provided the meritocratic principle is not overridden by prioritarian or other principles, thus suspending

50. More precisely, it is zero-sum for the “instrumental benefits” of education (such as employment and income) but not for the “intrinsic benefits” (for example, appreciation for literature). Brighouse, School Choice and Social Justice, 117.
the competition, only those members of less advantaged groups who considerably exceed their baseline expectations have a good chance of competing.

I will set aside the question of whether this competition might be rendered more fair, because democratic equality rejects competition as the means by which to distribute educational opportunities and, along with it, the meritocratic conception’s particular construal of education as a positional good. Education functions within the current distributional system as a positional good in a certain way: the improved positions of some come at the expense of a worsened position for others. But things don’t have to work this way. Democratic equality seeks to put people into democratic relationship as equal citizens, and thus the level of inequality in resources and opportunities is constrained to the extent required to achieve this aim. Citizens living under democratic equality view the talents possessed by themselves and others as social assets to be used for the benefit of all. Under this normative system of distribution, whatever positional advantage individuals might gain by developing their talents does not come at the cost of others in the overall scheme.

I have argued that educational opportunities cannot be distributed on the basis of natural talent and motivation because we cannot isolate these from morally arbitrary contingencies such as the social class into which one is born. But isn’t it unjust to distribute educational opportunities on the basis of developed talents and motivations when we know their development is influenced by social class? It is not as if there is a choice, at least for the time being. And the moral arbitrariness of social class is by no means straightforwardly distinguishable, if distinguishable at all, from the moral arbitrariness of the talents we would draw in the natural lottery if there were such a thing. Thus, the idea of tracking natural talent does

51. I am skeptical that more than marginal improvements can be made under a meritocratic regime because of what sociologists tell us about the propensity of those at the top of the advantage hierarchy to move to maintain their advantage in response to change. For a recent study documenting the phenomenon of “maximally maintained inequality,” see Thurston Domina and Joshua Saldana, “Does Raising the Bar Level the Playing Field? Mathematics Curricular Instensification and Inequality in American Schools, 1982–2004,” American Educational Research Journal 49, no. 4 (2012): 685–708. From another angle, Anderson sees the meritocratic regime as exemplifying a “politics of envy,” which would encourage people to do just what sociologists who employ the concept of “maximally maintained inequality” say they do (see Anderson, “Rethinking Equality of Opportunity”; and Anderson, “Fair Opportunity in Education”).

52. In “Equality, Adequacy, and Education for Citizenship,” Satz links this to Rawls’s difference principle as applied to the primary good of the social bases of self-respect. This limits the degree to which education should be conceived in terms of a fair competition versus fostering self-respect by fostering robust democratic relationships.

53. Under such an arrangement, according to Rawls, “it is not in general to the advantage of the less fortunate to propose policies which reduce the talents of others” [Rawls, A Theory of Justice, 107]. This is in contrast to the politics of envy associated with the meritocratic framework of fair competition [Anderson, “Rethinking Equality of Opportunity”; and Anderson, “Fair Opportunity in Education”].

54. See Thomas W. Pogge, Realizing Rawls [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989]. In “Moral and Political Aims of Education,” Brighouse is also sensitive to this issue, and it leads him to entertain the “radical” conception of educational equality, in which only differences in motivation justify unequal
not avoid the problem of the distribution of education being infused with some moral arbitrariness. The best we can do is to ensure that the distributional scheme is based on promoting the benefit of all and that we work to eliminate known sources of unfair advantage and disadvantage.

Ascertaining the justice/injustice of the distribution of educational opportunities under conditions in which the moral arbitrariness of the distribution of (developed) talents is unavoidable — the conditions under which we live — turns on the rationale and goals that underlie the distribution. Recall that democratic equality embraces two Rawlsian insights: human knowledge and talents should be conceived as public goods, and they should be distributed so as to benefit everyone. Given our world, in which talents are developed as a function of what one draws in the social lottery, certain African Americans will have superior (developed) talents compared to other African Americans, superior talents that can be traced to the first group having benefited from relatively advantaged social backgrounds. But democratic equality does not preclude preferring members of the first group in the allocation of opportunities provided this is the best way to promote the benefit of all and to further social justice. Such reasoning has long been used to justify race-based affirmative action that selects the most talented for open positions from among the groups that are targeted for affirmative action. Much more needs to be said about the relationship between democratic equality and distributive justice. But that is beyond my purposes here.

Conclusion

In these concluding remarks, I return to the concepts of ideal and ideology vis-à-vis the principle of educational equality. It might be objected that I have simply substituted one ideal and ideology — democratic equality — for another ideal and ideology — meritocratic equality. This charge doesn’t stick unless we fail to distinguish the two meanings each of “ideal” and “ideology” identified by Mills. Democratic equality is certainly an ideal in the sense of being a normative ideal that is not going to be realized any time soon, if ever. It is an ambitious ideal, to be sure. But unlike the meritocratic ideal, it does not rely on positing idealized constructs that engage other parts of the ideal but not the world, an

distributions. He ultimately rejects the radical conception on the grounds that it would sanction leveling down or huge expenditures to educate children with cognitive disabilities (read: natural disabilities). But notice that there is no need to appeal to natural ability/disability to draw Brighouse’s conclusion regarding limits on the resources to children with serious learning difficulties. The same conclusion can be reached where such difficulties are acquired but stable and refractory to intervention, as, for example, in the case of a child who is defiant, sees little value in school, and is very unlikely to learn what school has to offer because of the effects of a very difficult home life. (See Gutmann’s discussion of the cases of Rebecca versus Amy in Democratic Education, chap. 5.) The difference in these two approaches is that, whereas nature is the cause of the problem in the first approach, it is human action/inaction that is the cause in the second.

55. Probably the first to advance this defense of affirmative action was Ronald Dworkin, “Reverse Discrimination,” in Taking Rights Seriously (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977). It has subsequently been advanced by Gutmann in Democratic Education and by Anderson in The Imperative of Integration.
“idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual.”56 Waiting for the democratic ideal of equality may be waiting for a train that will never come in. But waiting for the meritocratic ideal to come in is waiting in the wrong station altogether.57

In the broad sense of the concept of ideology in currency nowadays, democratic equality58 is, indeed, an ideology, or part of one. But it is not an ideology in the sense of “a set of group ideas that reflect, and contribute to perpetuating, illicit group privilege.”59 It is the meritocratic ideal, which dominates educational policy in the United States and beyond, that is an ideology, or part of one, in that sense.

56. Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology,” 168.
58. To be clear, this is not Rawls’s version, but the version advanced by Anderson and adopted by me that does not appeal to natural intellectual talents and that construes the knowledge and skill required of democratic participation and to be developed in schools as broader than the “single hierarchy of cognitive development.”
59. Mills, “‘Ideal Theory’ as Ideology,” 166.