

BA Dissertation Report

Student: Mikuláš Pikhart

Title: Ke kritice meritokracie: Co je problematické na zásluhách?

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The student has written a subtle and wide-ranging dissertation on the concept of *meritocracy*. He has looked at the discussions of meritocracy of four relevant authors at various locations on the political spectrum: Frank Knight, Friedrich von Hayek, John Rawls and Michael Sandel. The final chapter concludes with the student's critical summary of Thomas Mulligan's recent 'defence' of meritocracy.

As the student explains, the classic problem of desert and responsibility is to find the limits of the self. The 'meritocrat' wants to reward the individual's choice to expend effort toward short-term benefits or toward the development of her talents and experience in order to reap longer-term benefits. And this position is very plausible. Who would deny that only the best football players deserve to play on the national team – rather than the most attractive players or the wealthiest players?

And yet so much of our self is not a matter of choice and effort, as Rawls explained best (the student has summarised Rawls well). We are born with certain talents and not others; we develop certain talents, to certain degrees, during our upbringing in an unchosen environment of parental and social support (or lack of it); we develop the necessary confidence for activity in a certain context or we do not; we encounter opportunities to develop our talents, and to enjoy doing so – or we do not; we find that our talents are recognised with greater or lesser rewards, based on their social value. (Who would have thought that kicking a ball could be so profitable?) All this is a matter of luck, is morally arbitrary, and therefore we cannot deserve the rewards of our efforts. (And even if some talented individuals do deserve more benefits than others, they surely do not deserve the obscenely inflated salaries of FTSE-100 CEOs and Premier League footballers.) And yet the only completely fair alternative would seem to be the allocation of social benefits on a strictly egalitarian basis, in recognition of the equal social worth of all citizens. (But it would make for a terrible football game to watch!) Trying to find the right balance between desert and egalitarianism is the tricky part.

The four main authors go beyond this central problem in interesting ways, and the student surveyed some of the problems well: I particularly enjoyed the discussion of Sandel's recent book, the idea of credentialism, and the link between humiliation and populism.

The writing is fluent, well-structured, with useful signposting. The philosophical discussion is enhanced by references to empirical studies (e.g. about low American

social mobility). The footnotes provide interesting asides and elaborations. There is the right density of primary authors for a dissertation of this length. The argument is clear, with a good pace. Overall, I would have to recommend a grade of **excellent**.

I only have some small criticisms. The first is structural. The student engages well with the first four authors, but seems to suggest that the most important focus will be the meritocratic fifth author, Mulligan (in the “second part” of the thesis, as the abstract claims). And yet Mulligan gets only 12 pages out of 60, and his arguments are not elaborated in enough detail to avoid the obvious challenges, especially that of the arbitrariness argument (AA). Moreover, I didn’t fully understand Mulligan’s conception of identity. Yes, perhaps my footballing talent can be an essential property so that I (as the specific person I am) could not have existed without it (it would have been someone else). How does this make my talent any less morally arbitrary, for Mulligan?

Second, the student chose to focus on the economic-distributional question, and that’s fine. But as he points out, the idea of desert ranges much more widely, and it would have been interesting to see how desert works in different contexts. I would have started with a whole chapter on Feinberg’s desert bases, for example (Feinberg is only mentioned briefly in Ch. 5). But also

- Tantalizingly, the student discusses *need* in the Knight chapter, but I wanted to hear more. There are lots of different kinds of things one needs, and only some of them ground a desert claim. Here a seminal thinker is David Wiggins. (Moreover, what’s the relation between a need and a reasonable expectation?)
- One excellent focus for discussions of desert is the debate over affirmative action in employment, in government, in universities.
- It would have been interesting to see a discussion of desert within a smaller political unit, such as a family. Two parents have three identical triplets: one is a gifted violinist, one is average in all respects, and one has a disability. How could and should the parents decide in allocating their scarce resources of time, energy and money?

But these criticisms are minor, and I have added them merely to encourage the student to explore them in future work.