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Meritocracy and The Common Good

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Introduction

In contemporary liberal democracies the concept of meritocracy appears to be under significant scrutiny. Meritocracy is accused of creating or exacerbating a wide range of contemporary ills, from the rise of populism to the erosion of civic space. As Win McCormack (McCormack, 2020) has recently argued in the pages of *The New Republic,* meritocracy is currently on trial, accused of undermining equality and the common good. McCormack's article is the latest in a flurry of commentaries and opinion pieces elucidating the word's mysterious origins and the concept's damaging consequences for twenty-first-century liberal democracies (Foroohar, 2020; Kuper, 2020; Collini, 2021). Critiques of meritocracy appear to represent a sturdy bridge across the widening gulf of contemporary political debate, uniting progressives, conservatives and even central bankers (King, 2020; Haldane, 2021). This paper explores these questions by analysing two recent critiques of meritocracy from the American philosopher Michael Sandel and the political commentator David Goodhart. The final section draws on these critiques to provide some conclusions for those interested in character education as an alternative to meritocracy.

1. A Brief History of Merit

In its purest form meritocracy is a normative distributive principle for organising rewards, power and status. It purports to distribute these rewards according to a definition of 'merit' which usually prioritises measurable intelligence and, to varying degrees, effort. The concept of meritocracy has a long and complicated history. While many of the synonyms and near synonyms used to describe the concept – whether Thomas Carlyle's 'natural aristocracy of talent' (Carlyle, 1843: 39) or H.G. Wells' 'intellectual samurai' (Wells, 1905) – have their own distinctive etymological and conceptual histories, they also serve to describe overlapping social and political phenomena associated with modernity: a growing emphasis on efficiency, expertise and economic performance; the threat to social harmony posed by a burgeoning class politics; and the desire to maintain cultural and political elites in an increasingly democratic age. The word 'meritocracy' first appeared in print in 1956 but became lodged in Britain's national lexicon following the 1958 publication of *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, a fictional dystopian satire by the British sociologist Michael Young (Young, 1961 [1958]). Young elaborated his concerns about the concept of meritocracy through a fictional narrator and from the vantage point of a futuristic PhD thesis written in the year 2033. Considering *The Rise of the Meritocracy* was published in 1958, Young was projecting the trends he witnessed and studied in 1950s Britain onto an imagined future.

The Rise of the Meritocracy explores the consequences of a society in which each citizen's role and status is determined by the formula 'I.Q. + Effort = Merit'. The winners, believing they have earned their position amongst the elite, hoard greater status, power and rewards for themselves, crystallizing into a rigid and repressive ruling caste; the losers, labelled as 'stupid', are condemned to a life of drudgery working as street cleaners or domestic servants for the elite. The inequalities generated by this system are initially tolerated and seen to reflect the relative 'talents' of each individual. Everyone, it is argued, had a fair crack of the whip and owes their social position to the so-called objective measurements of intelligence and hard work. Gradually, however, this system unravels. The meritocracy, once fluid and open, ossifies into a hereditary ruling class which passes its advantages onto the next generation. While Young imagined this would result from the genetic bases of intelligence, the idea that intelligent parents were more likely to have more intelligent children, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* represents a prescient window into contemporary Britain where privileges are conferred through social, cultural and economic means. Without any desire to understand 'the stupid', as our hubristic fictional author describes the lower classes, or even a common civic or democratic language with which to communicate with them, the meritocratic elite are blindsided when protests engulf the nation. The fictional author of this thesis argues that May 2034, when he will be listening to speeches by leading Populist rebels, will be 'Britain's 1848' as the

lower classes have no power to make revolt effective. The thesis ends with these conclusions. A footnote, however, reveals that the author was killed at Peterloo and notes that the 'failings of sociology are as illuminating as its successes' (Young, 1961 [1958]: 188, 189).

Despite these dystopian origins, meritocracy was widely and erroneously evoked by a wide range of political leaders across post-war Britain – from Harold Wilson (Thompson, 2006) to Margaret Thatcher (Henry, 1983), Tony Blair (White, 2001) to Theresa May (May, 2016) - as a positive, classless vision of the nation's social hierarchy. While meritocracy, and its attendant themes of social mobility, instrumental knowledge and equal opportunity, remained a cherished goal for political elites and policymakers this is not to say a meritocratic social order was ever successfully realised. In many ways the concept retained its broad appeal precisely because of its unrealised status: it could, therefore, be widely evoked at regular intervals as a classless alternative to what had gone before. The meritocratic language of Tony Blair's Labour Government particularly frustrated Young. A year before his death in 2002, Young lamented how the central messages of his book had been ignored by successive generations of political elites, policymakers and public commentators (Young, 2001). Blair placed the concept of meritocracy at the heart of his Third Way agenda, declaring the Party should be characterised not as 'crypto-Thatcherites' or 'old-style socialists' but 'as meritocrats' (White, 2001). In education policy, for example, Labour emphasised choice, diversity, competition, streaming and specialisation and showed enthusiasm for the market-driven reforms introduced by earlier Conservative administrations (Gewirtz, 2002). Responding to Blair, Young argued that much of what he predicted in 1958 'has already come about.' While 'it is good sense to appoint individual people to jobs on their merit', Young claimed, 'it is the opposite when those who are judged to have merit of a particular kind harden into a new social class without room in it for others.' At the turn of the century, this 'new class' of meritocrats 'has the means at hand, and largely under its control, by which it reproduces itself' (Young, 2001). While in the last two decades politicians have continued to evoke meritocracy, the inequalities the system generates appear even less connected to intelligence and hard work and more the product of class advantage and inherited privilege than ever before. In recent years, not a week goes by without a journalist, or public commentator claiming to have uncovered meritocracy's bleak origins and making claims for *The Rise of the Meritocracy*'s prescient lessons for the contemporary moment (see for example: Krastev, 2017; Appiah, 2018: 137-84; Leonard, 2019; Haldane, 2021).

2. Corroding the Common Good

The most significant of these recent critiques of meritocratic inequalities comes from the American philosopher Michael Sandel (Sandel, 2020) and the journalist and political commentator David Goodhart (Goodhart, 2020). While their critiques are not identical – Sandel approaches the US context from a largely philosophical background and Goodhart tackles the UK with a greater interest in data and social science research – their respective books are connected by a desire to challenge the centrality of meritocracy and expose its consequences for democracy and the common good. In Sandel's view, meritocracy does much more than drive material inequality; it creates a toxic economy of esteem. In a similar vein, Goodhart claims that a mass 'cognitive elite' dominates Britain's status hierarchy, denying recognition to the non-credentialed and creating a damaging imbalance between jobs designated as predominantly involving the 'head' and those of 'hand and heart'. Sandel and Goodhart's critiques can be broken down into four parts: (I) as Young highlighted in his fictional dystopia, meritocracy tends towards oligarchy as one generation passes on privileges and advantages to another; (II) the concept encourages an individualised notion of success and failure which obscures the social conditions necessary for individual achievement; (III) meritocracy fails to recognise, whether in economic or cultural terms, contributions to the common good which cannot be easily quantified or measured; (IV) and finally, bringing these three parts together, meritocracy erodes commonality and civic life. Each of these will now be discussed in turn.

(I) Meritocracy tends towards oligarchy

Meritocracy tends towards oligarchy as privilege is passed on from one generation to the next. In the United States and the United Kingdom, nearly half of the economic advantage of high earning parents is passed onto their children (Sandel, 2020: 76) For Sandel, the 'rhetoric of rising' at the heart of the meritocratic promise therefore rings hollow. In contemporary America those born to poor parents tend to stay poor adults. To replace Young's equation of 'I.Q. + Effort = Merit', Goodhart defines modern Britain's social order by the formula 'average cognitive ability + privilege = better chance of high status' (Goodhart, 2020: 3-4, 67). At the heart of this prescience was Young's belief that a meritocracy, at first open and fluid, would eventually ossify into a hereditary ruling elite. If *The Rise of the Meritocracy* relied too heavily on genetics to explain this trend, the contemporary social order has managed a similar effect through the effective transmission of economic and cultural capital (McNamee & Miller, 2013 [2004]: 86, 93; Markovits, 2019). Here, Sandel and Goodhart build on emerging research from the social sciences and critical theory into the class privilege lurking behind claims of 'merit'. As Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison (Friedman & Laurison, 2019: 12-13) have argued in their book *The Class Ceiling*, people from working-class origins do occasionally make it into elite jobs, but it is rare; only about 10% of people from working-class backgrounds (3.3% of people overall) 'traverse the steepest upward mobility path' into the elite.

Origins, in other words, remain strongly associated with destinations in contemporary Britain as the downward mobility at the heart of Young's novel never materialised. The idea of meritocracy, the sociologist Jo Littler has argued, has become a key means through which plutocracy – or rule by the wealthy - perpetuates, reproduces and extends itself (Littler, 2017: 2). In light of this evidence it is tempting to look back at the first few decades of the post-war world as a golden age of social mobility, to scour the history books for lessons which can be applied to the contemporary moment and which will finally allow us to realise the meritocratic promise. As the historical sociology of Erzsébet Bukodi and John Goldthorpe has revealed, however, education has never had much of an impact on social mobility in Britain. In recent decades there has been no levelling-off of social mobility but instead 'less room at the top'. Bukodi and Goldthorpe go as far as to suggest that the increasing salience of educational credentials may have in fact had a negative impact on upward mobility, highlighting the ease with which the social, cultural and economic advantages of education can be replicated by privileged groups vis-à-vis other drivers of mobility (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2011; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2016).

The work of both Sandel and Goodhart is important, however, because it avoids the conventional trap of arguing for a more meritocratic meritocracy; of claiming that the only problem with the concept is our failure to live up to its promises. Sandel and Goodhart pose fundamental questions about meritocracy's claims to justice and fairness even in an ideal world where all relative privilege was eliminated. As Sandel highlights, meritocracy does not promise greater equality but fairer mobility (Sandel, 2020: 85). Both authors characterise the concept as posing distinct problems for the political Left. By confining their struggle for greater equality to questions of meritocratic representation, progressives fail to grapple with the root causes of inequality and are left, in the words of the American political commentator Christopher Hayes, trying to make the 'meritocracy more meritocratic' (Hayes, 2012: 48). Calls for greater social justice are defined in the negative, focused solely on questions of removing barriers rather than promoting a vision of the good. As James Arthur, Kristján Kristjánsson and Candace Vogler have argued, 'without a blueprint of the good life' or a positive conception of social justice, educationalists 'flounder down a cul-de-sac of fighting individual ills without any sense of what combines them into cases of injustice' (Arthur, Kristjánsson, Vogler, 2021:112). While fighting discrimination will always be part of any progressive vision, it has become separated from a broader programme to tackle the class structures and privileges which produce meritocratic inequality. As Sandel puts it, any serious response to the gap between the rich and the poor must 'reckon directly with inequalities of power and wealth, rather

than rest content with the project of helping people scramble up a ladder whose rungs grow farther and farther apart' (Sandel, 2020: 24).

(II) Meritocracy encourages an individualistic interpretation of success and failure

Like Young, Sandel and Goodhart demonstrate how meritocratic inequalities promote an individualistic notion of success and failure. In Young's fictional Britain, the meritocratic upper classes were

[…] no longer weakened by self-doubt and self-criticism. Today the eminent know that success is just reward for their own capacity, for their own effort and for their own undeniable achievement. They deserve to belong to a superior class (Young, 1961 [1958]: 106).

A meritocratic conception of success and failure therefore encourages those who are fortunate to succeed to sidestep questions of duty or responsibility. It obscures or devalues the social conditions vital for any individual achievement: whether the loving family, the supportive teacher or the stable community. Alongside this, it downplays the notion that what is classified as a talent is largely a question of luck and contingency (Rawls, 2009 [1971]:75; Frank, 2017; Lauder, 2020, 16-17). Not only is this a claim about the relative luck in acquiring or developing a talent – whether due to the lottery of birth or the advantages of environment - but also the historical contingencies of talents: the fact that Lionel Messi, for example, happens to live in a society that happens to prize his talents as a footballer. It is easy to see how his skills would have gone to waste if he had been born in Medieval England. As Sandel highlights, 'natural gifts and the advantages they bring embarrass the meritocratic faith' (Sandel, 2020: 125). To compensate for this the meritocracy inflates the significance of effort, the second component of Young's fictional formula. In the words of his fictional narrator, 'the lazy genius is not one' (Young, 1961 [1958]: 94). While effort is important in developing a talent, we need to be clearer about its limits; no matter how hard I try I will never be, or never could have been, a better footballer than Lionel Messi.

The meritocracy therefore propagates a narrow understanding of human flourishing, one which concentrates on climbing the ladder and eschews the virtues of humility and gratitude. At the heart of Sandel and Goodhart's critique of the meritocracy is how the inequality it generates corrodes the notion of a common good (Sandel, 2020: 14; Goodhart, 2020: 147-48). By encouraging us to consider ourselves as authors of our own fate, the concept of meritocracy undermines any sense of commonality or civic obligation. This erosion of commonality is an important, if underexplored, component of *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Here, the meritocratic elite have

Come as close as anyone to understanding the full and ever-growing complexity of our technical civilisation. They are trained in science, and it is scientists who have inherited the earth. What can they have in common with people whose education stopped at sixteen or seventeen leaving them with the merest smattering of dog science? (Young, 1961 [1958]: 106-07).

As Sandel makes clear, 'meritocratic hubris reflects the tendency of winners to inhale too deeply of their success, to forget the luck and good fortune that helped them on their way.' More significant, however, are the cases of misplaced achievement. Here, meritocracy serves less to obscure luck or fortune, but to cover up privilege and advantage. Increasingly elites are borrowing the 'luster of merit' to buttress their inherited advantages or privileges (Sandel, 2020: 23, 13). Recent research (Friedman, O'Brien & McDonald, 2021) has highlighted how individuals from privileged class backgrounds often position themselves as ascending from humble origins or overcoming significant barriers. This way they are able to 'tell an upward story of career success "against the odds"'. This discourse constructs an ideal 'figurative practitioner' unfettered by ascribed advantage and, in so doing, demands that others find a way to articulate a similarly 'worthy' and 'deserving' story of career success (Friedman, O'Brien & McDonald, 2021: 4). Whereas in the past ostentatious displays

of wealth explicitly advertised privilege, now your advantages have to be obscured by dressing down and through stories of humbleness.

(III) Meritocracy contributes to a crisis of recognition

Connected to this individualised notion of success and failure, and the narrow view of human flourishing it entails, is the crisis of recognition induced by a meritocratic view of society. While in Young's dystopia scientific knowledge is the ultimate arbiter of meritocratic value, in the modern economy we fail to recognise the value of contributions which cannot be easily quantified or measured. As the Canadian, former Governor of the Bank of England Mark Carney has recently argued as part of the BBC Reith Lectures, societies have drifted 'from moral to market sentiments' (Carney, 2020; Carney, 2021). Here, the role of the market has shifted from serving the ends or values of society to becoming an end in and of itself. This 'flattening of values' corrodes those which have tended to exist outside of the market (e.g. civic virtues) and in the process has tended to undercut the social foundations upon which any economic activity fundamentally relies. In short, anything not priced, not deemed financially valuable, in our society is not valued (Mazzucato, 2017; Carney, 2020; Carney, 2021). Serving demand in the market is simply a matter of satisfying the wide range of tastes and desires people happen to have at that particular moment in time. The ethical significance of satisfying them, however, depends on their moral worth. Evaluating this worth involves making contested judgements which go beyond the discipline of economics.

Sandel illuminates this 'flattening of values' in the *Tyranny of Merit* through a reference to the fictional character of Walter White, the teacher, father and drug-dealing kingpin of the Emmy-award winning drama *Breaking Bad*. Most viewers would agree that White's contribution as a teacher was more significant and collectively valuable than his activity as a drug dealer. 'Even if meth were legal', Sandel argues, 'a talented chemist might still make more money producing meth than teaching students.' But this does not mean that a 'meth dealer's contribution is more valuable than a teacher's' (Sandel, 2020: 138-39). In a similar vein, few would have argued that Captain Sir Tom Moore's fundraising efforts, reaching £33 million in total, would have represented less of a contribution had he only met his initial target of £1000. In this sense the value of his effort was recognised in the civic or moral character of his actions rather than because of their strict monetary value. For Goodhart, this failure of economic recognition has led to a profound imbalance between the professional world of Head, the manual world of Hand and the caring world of Heart. The knowledge economy has placed cognitive meritocracy at the centre of the status hierarchy, and the 'cognitively blessed have thrived, but many others feel they have lost place and meaning' (Goodhart, 2020: x). Nowhere are the consequences of this imbalance more devastatingly felt than in the care sector. Here, care workers remain the victims of a damaging tautological spiral: because their labour has been historically undervalued they are not paid a lot and because they are not paid a lot their labour is not seen as valuable.

The crisis of recognition, however, is not just an economic phenomenon but also moral and cultural. In other words, the grievances of voters 'are not only about wages and jobs but also about social esteem.' (Sandel, 2020: 18) For Goodhart, 'qualities such as character, integrity, experience, common sense, courage and willingness to toil are by no means irrelevant, but they command little respect.' This leads to what Goodhart describes as 'moral deregulation' where it becomes harder to 'feel satisfaction and self-respect living ordinary, decent lives' (Goodhart, 2020: 3-4). It is precisely this gulf of esteem which Goodhart, Sandel and others have identified as a key cause behind the destabilisation of Western politics in the last decade (Goodhart, 2020: 153; Sandel, 2020: 71-72; Bovens & Wille, 2017; Chou, Moffitt & Bryant, 2019; Goldthorpe & Bukodi, 2021). In this formulation the populist backlash was provoked, at least in part, 'by the galling sense that those who stood astride the hierarchy of merit looked down with disdain on those who they considered less accomplished than themselves' (Sandel, 2020: 71-72). In the Brexit referendum on membership of

the European Union in 2016, 75% of people with minimal educational qualifications voted to leave with a similar proportion of degree-holders backing remain (Hobolt, 2016: 15; Goodhart, 2020: 148). A similar credentialist divide separated voters for and against Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election (Monkovic, 2016). For Goodhart the issue with experts is not their knowledge per se, but how they position subjective viewpoints as politically 'neutral.' There is also evidence that meritocratic hubris is a factor in the widening political divides and intolerant public discourse of recent years. As David Robson has argued in his book *The Intelligent Trap*, smart people, by test standards, often lack rational judgements and common sense, they have problems weighing evidence and can use their extra brainpower to rationalise erroneous beliefs and dismiss contradictory evidence (Robson, 2019).

(IV) Meritocracy corrodes the common good

Uniting these three strands of critique is how the concept of meritocracy corrodes the idea of a common good. As the structural inequalities legitimised by meritocracy widen, and as individual's feel they truly deserve their 'success' or 'failure', we feel less inclined to imagine ourselves as part of common civic projects. The failure to recognise the vital functions performed outside of the marketplace - embodied in the figure of the unpaid carer – leaves large swathes of citizens feeling they lack the sufficient knowledge or status to participate in politics or civic debate. Increasingly, the language of the consumer has replaced that of the citizen, with profound implications for the nature of our politics. This shift promotes a technocratic view of democracy where decisions of 'right and wrong' are replaced by questions of 'smart and dumb.' The 'smart' thing to do often points to prudential or self-interested reasons that do not depend on moral considerations. At a time of intense polarisation, the language of 'smart and dumb' has an understandable appeal; it 'seems to offer', Sandel argues, 'a refuge from ideological combat, a mode of political argument that steps back from moral controversy and seeks consensus on the basis of what's smart, sensible, prudent' (Sandel, 2020: 92-94). The last two decades have witnessed a drift towards technocratic depoliticization, with significant aspects of decision-making removed from the arena of national democratic deliberation. In *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, the role of Parliament declines as the complexity of state activity increases. The House of Lords becomes the 'central committee' of the meritocratic elite as the principle of 'selection largely replaced election.' The Civil Service takes on an increasingly important role and attracts the best brains:

As conflict in society has been reduced, the civil servants know that they no longer need keep aloof, have taken a more active part in politics to make up for the devitalisation of the two-party system. Both they and the vital House of Lords belong to a meritocracy of growing power (Young, 1961 [1958]: 137-138)

If technocratic politics is experienced as expansive and empowering by cognitive elites, it is 'narrowing and disempowering' for non-elites whose response can mutate into populist rejection (Goodhart, 2020: 156). In this sense, the problem with market-driven globalisation is not simply a matter of distributive justice. Conducting our public discourse as if it were possible to 'outsource moral and political judgements' to markets, or to experts and technocrats, has emptied democratic argument of meaning and purpose. As Sandel elucidates, both technocratic ideologies and polarised shouting matches fail to engage in a substantive way with the moral convictions that animate democratic citizens; neither cultivates the habit of reasoning together about competing conceptions of justice or the common good (Sandel, 2020: 30-31, 108).

3. Meritocracy and Character Education

Sandel and Goodhart demonstrate how the ramifications of a meritocracy go well beyond the sphere of education policy. The concept of meritocracy ultimately corrodes democratic processes,

undermines equal citizenship and devalues civic life. Still, the purpose, structure and content of education remain fundamental to understandings of the concept. The school and the university are often the battlegrounds where the broader issues associated with meritocracy are debated and played out. For Sandel, higher education in both the US and the UK has become a 'sorting machine that promises mobility on the basis of merit but entrenches privilege and promotes attitudes towards success corrosive of the commonality democracy requires.' (Sandel, 2020: 155) Accompanying this is the development of a 'culture of invasive, achievement-driven, pushy parenting that does not serve teenagers well' and which led to scandals like the Varsity Blues admissions scandal (Sandel, 2020: 178; Korn & Levitz, 2020). Years of anxious striving to get into university leaves young people with a fragile sense of self-worth which is vulnerable to the exacting judgements of parents, teachers, admissions committees and ultimately, themselves. 'Perfectionism', Sandel argues, 'is the emblematic meritocratic malady' (Sandel, 2020: 181). Similarly, Goodhart demonstrates how debates about meritocratic education in the UK are too 'economy-oriented' and neglect questions of lifelong learning and citizenship. The narrow conception of human flourishing at the heart of meritocracy – the notion that individual success is only to be realised through academic channels – has led to the profound imbalance between Head, Hand and Heart and continues to push as many children as possible into 'middle-ranking cognitive jobs that are evidently in decline' (Goodhart, 2020: 278).

The rise of neoliberalism has only exacerbated these meritocratic tendencies, whether in the system's over-reliance on exam performance, the intensification of league tables or the centrality of university admission to an individual's life chances. In responding to these trends it may seem strange to evoke the idea of character education. The likes of Allen and Bull (Allen & Bull, 2018) argue that proponents of character education seek to promote 'individualistic, free-market and socially conservative ideas.' In characterisations such as these, the revival of character education is said to have accompanied and sustained the rise of 'broader neoliberal developments in education policy' (Jerome & Kisby, 2020: 2). Yet this is a significant misreading of both character and neoliberalism. If neoliberalism is defined as the 'disenchantment of politics by economics' (Davies, 2014) then it is an ideology profoundly uninterested in questions of character. Instead it relies on crude metrics which can be easily measured and compared. This explains the overreliance on test scores and credentials which provide 'objective' measurements of an individual's capacity or 'merit'. Character, by contrast, is a much more complex concept which cannot be so readily quantified. At the heart of critiques of character education is the notion that it has developed alongside, or in some cases encouraged, a decline in the political (Suissa, 2015). Here, citizenship education and character education are juxtaposed; the former is characterised as promoting the necessary knowledge and skills that enable participation in political and democratic activities and the latter is said to prioritise personal ethics over public ones (Kisby, 2017). This juxtaposition only holds, however, with a maximalist interpretation of citizenship education and a minimalist interpretation of character education; interpretations which bear little resemblance to reality and which fail to recognise the fundamental connection between citizenship and character.

Instead of recognising the centrality of civic education to the very purpose of schooling, citizenship education has been consistently watered down and is now little more than a byword for political literacy. A political literacy approach often fails to recognise or to emphasise the importance of character and virtue to young people's formation as active citizens. The separation of civic virtues from moral virtues is a strange development considering how historically republicans of all stripes were generally sceptical of theoretical attempts to separate our identity as citizens from our moral convictions when engaging in public discourse about justice and rights. There is no real sense, however, that learning certain capacities or to follow certain rules 'makes citizens better humans, only that it makes them better citizens, able to operate effectively in public life in a non-dominating manner' (Peterson, 2011: 84). A character approach to citizenship therefore presupposes a more direct connection between the individual and their community. As Andrew Peterson (Peterson, 2020: 148) has argued, the relationship envisaged between the citizen and the community is not one

in which the former is subordinate to the latter, but one in which citizens participate through active, deliberate engagement and in doing so express their character. While academic success is clearly important for human flourishing, a character education approach encompasses a broader definition of success, one which factors in an individual's contribution to the common good. It does not divide individuals into 'successes' or 'failures' based on their credentials, encouraging us instead to consider the social and collective conditions which foster flourishing. A focus on character sits in opposition to the technocratic politics of 'smart versus dumb', which evaluates individuals' contributions based on their credentials and which Sandel and Goodhart pinpoint as exacerbating the problems of contemporary democratic life. Instead, it encourages the 'habit of reasoning together about competing conceptions of justice or the common good', implored by Sandel. A properly constituted character education programme, one which takes political and civic commitments seriously, therefore poses a profound challenge to neoliberal meritocracy rather than, as is argued by the likes of Kisby and Jerome, serving to prop it up.

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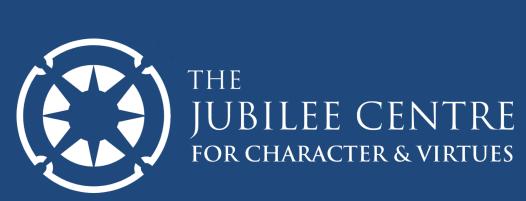
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