



A Providentialism Without God

The case against meritocracy

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. McCarragher cites three recent books that argue that meritocracy should be done away with, but the authors disagree about the extent of the economic transformation required to accomplish that goal. Whose account do you find most plausible? Is McCarragher right that severing the link between professional success and university education is only possible through a socialist system of worker-controlled enterprises?

2. McCarragher quotes Michael J. Sandel's criticism of the "soul-destroying demands" children are faced with under meritocracy. Have you experienced this in your own family or school? What can parents learn from Sandel's critique? How would parenting change under the socialist, post-meritocratic vision McCarragher advances?

3. McCarragher writes that "Defining moral, political, and ideological issues as problems of technical or managerial know-how, meritocratic politicians abandon the antiquated rhetoric of justice and fellowship." How does the meritocratic ideal influence our political priorities? How does neoliberalism reward people in the "cult of smart"?

4. McCarragher criticizes the widely held liberal view that universities, not movements or political parties, are the most effective method of social transformation. Do you agree? Are schools overrated as vehicles of social change? How should a just social movement or political party think about education?

5. A meaningful adherence to the principle of equal opportunity would help level wealth and income inequalities. But Fredrik deBoer calls for abandoning equality of opportunity, insisting instead on a more radical "equality of outcomes." What does he mean by this? Is equal opportunity morally salvageable? Are inequalities in material resources ever justifiable, and if so, under what circumstances?

6. One of the foundational questions of political philosophy is: How should rulers be chosen? In a post-meritocratic world, how would you answer this question? What capacities and aptitudes should we value in political leaders? What training should future leaders receive?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Jackson Lears, "The Liberal Arts vs. Neoliberalism," April 2015: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/liberal-arts-vs-neoliberalism>

Mercedes K. Schneider, "Bad Education," November 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/bad-education>

Eugene McCarragher, "Undemocratic by Design," October 2018: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/undemocratic-design>

Nick Baumann, "Pulling Up the Ladder," September 2012: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/pulling-ladder>

Rand Richards Cooper, "The College-Admissions Frenzy," August 2018: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/college-admissions-frenzy>

Alasdair MacIntyre, "The End of Education," October 2006: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/end-education>