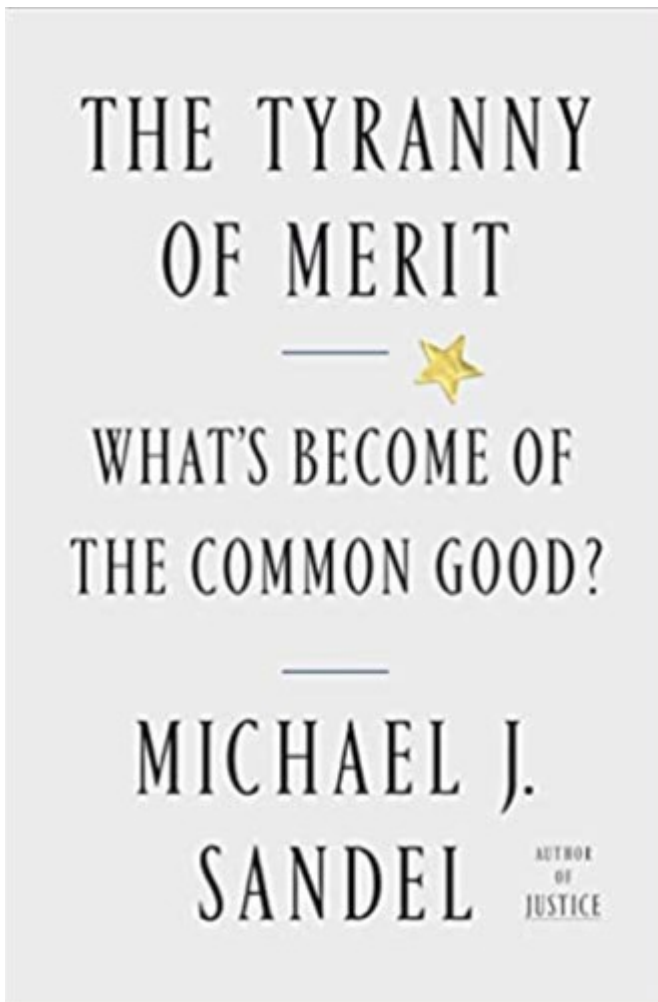


Meritocracy's trail of humiliation

Michael Sandel considers some alternatives.

by [Charles Scriven](#) in the [May 5, 2021](#) issue

In Review



The Tyranny of Merit

What's Become of the Common Good?

By Michael J. Sandel

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Seeing an America riven by rancor and distrust, Harvard political philosopher Michael J. Sandel makes a case for humility as the key to renewed solidarity and shared sacrifice. To anyone who both cares about politics and admires clear-eyed philosophical exposition, this book will seem at once urgent and compelling. Further, since it touches on both secular and religious thought (though the latter less perceptively), this book all but cries out for further dialogue with the Christian tradition.

To begin, Sandel argues that one main cause of discord is that today “winners” think they deserve their advantage, and “losers” fall into self-doubt, humiliation, and resentment. America is steeped in this point of view, which Sandel calls *meritocratic*. Popular rhetoric says that your worthiness determines your level of success—your income, your status, your prospects overall; if you “work hard and play by the rules” you can go as far as your talents will take you.

But despite the luster of merit winners confer on themselves, they are neither as self-sufficient nor as self-made as they suppose. Successful people are indebted to parents, teachers, mentors, and friends. They have also benefited from luck—not least for their raw talent, and also for their given circumstances. Variances in family advantages, opportunities for education, and mobility give the lie to what Sandel calls “meritocratic hubris,” a boastful frame of mind that is both galling and self-deceived.

Meritocracy easily hardens into a kind of tyranny—Sandel calls it “unjust rule.” In America, the winners have managed to consolidate their advantages, pass them on to their children, and thus create a hereditary aristocracy. They have also defined the good in economic terms and played down the moral and civic virtue that is basic to citizen solidarity. A resulting preoccupation with technocratic expertise has weakened concern about pernicious inequalities and heightened fixation on economic advantage.

Would it not be better, Sandel asks, for society to overcome this “morally blinkered” point of view? Would not greater humility, and greater concern with shared well-being, help mend our resentments and fractious politics?

Competency and personal responsibility do matter, and Sandel knows they differ among individuals. But his concern is claims to merit, and he notes that even where

religious communities emphasize grace, a sense of pride and self-help erodes any ethics of gratitude or humility. What Sandel calls the balance between grace (or luck) and merit is hard to sustain and is now shifting sharply toward merit. In America, success is a sign of virtue and the lack of it is a proof of fault. Meanwhile, the grievance-stoking gap between the richest and the rest continues to widen.

Sandel also takes up the premise that equal opportunity—meritocracy's crucial precondition—depends most of all on education, especially college education. This assumption has fostered an obsession with credentials and further sharpens our focus on the technocratic. A smart-versus-dumb contrast has become fashionable, while the difference between right and wrong, between just and unjust, has lost purchase on society's imagination.

Both meritocracies and aristocracies are highly unequal, says Sandel, but the former, by generating hubris on one side and humiliation on the other, eats away at the concord and shared purpose that communal life requires. Laying this negative possibility before us, Sandel considers two alternatives to sheer meritocracy.

One is the free-market liberalism associated with Friedrich Hayek. Here freedom takes center stage, and the only equality befitting that freedom is "the purely formal equality of all citizens before the law." States offend against freedom if they take steps to mitigate differences of income. Merit is no rightful determinant of pay, only the value the free market assigns to a person's work. But in thus linking pay exclusively with (market) value, this alternative to meritocracy, Sandel points out, still feeds hubris and humiliation.

Another alternative is the welfare-state liberalism championed by John Rawls. The law-abiding rich may not fully deserve their wealth, but they remain entitled to it so long as attendant inequalities can be made, somehow, to help society's less advantaged. Thus, against Hayek, Rawls defends redistributive taxation.

But entitlement too smacks of meritocracy and its trail of hubris and humiliation. What is more, welfare-state liberalism, as surely as free-market liberalism, pays inadequate attention to the debt successful people owe. Others have cooperated toward the building of a system—public services, roads and bridges, and legal, educational, and family support—that enables citizens to thrive and some of them to become well-off. To diminish this fact undervalues social solidarity.

Next Sandel connects his analysis to education and work. He describes how, in the 1940s, the influence of Harvard president James Bryant Conant led American higher education to tether admission to merit rather than to wealth and connections. High schools became sorting mechanisms for identifying the best-performing students and enabling elite universities to be genuinely meritocratic.

But there were problems. Merit tracks and consolidates privilege. The sorting process exacerbates hubris and humiliation. Heightened competition underscores individual striving and undermines solidarity. Sandel suggests several ways of blunting, if not eliminating, these impacts.

Meritocracy also inflicts “insidious injury” on society’s modestly paid workers, Sandel argues. They are demeaned by low wages and lack of recognition. They suffer disproportionately from suicides, drug overdoses, and alcoholic liver disease.

One part of the fix—and here Sandel invokes Roman Catholic reflection—is contributive justice, a shaping of communal life that gives people the conviction of truly contributing to the common good. This would require fresh initiative toward decent remuneration and also toward working-class inclusion in society’s discussion of how we may live “worthwhile and flourishing lives” *together*, says Sandel. The point is to signal the dignity of work and to enhance the cohesion of the citizenry.

Meritocracy undermines social solidarity by blinding the successful to their debt and by sorting people into noninteracting enclaves. That analysis, which is the crux of the book, seems unassailable. Although a total cure seems out of reach, Sandel offers suggestions that could help.

Still, one feature of his analysis prompts uneasiness. He says that meritocracy remains a threat because the balance between merit and grace is hard to sustain. At this point, however, Christian tradition may offer useful insight.

D. M. Baillie, a 20th-century Scottish theologian, spoke of the “paradox of grace,” a decisive feature, he said, of authentic Christian experience. As with Paul and Augustine, the truly faithful aspire to goodness by choice and effort yet forswear all self-congratulation. I live and work, said Paul, yet it is “by God’s *grace* that I am what I am.” To anyone who takes moral responsibility, Augustine declared: “Thy merits are the gifts of God.”

The word *paradox* allows for the ineliminable complexity in Christian (or any thoughtfully considered) moral experience. I really do take a certain stance or act a certain way. Yet my ability to do so really does feel like something to be grateful for. That both of these are true reflects a mystery no explanation can clear away. Sandel's idea of "balance" between merit and grace misses all this; it certainly cannot vanquish hubris.

Baillie calls the paradox of grace the "secret of Christian character." Could it not also be the secret of social solidarity? Except by quashing self-inflation, we cannot strengthen mutual care and cooperation. Even in upholding personal responsibility, we must ponder the two conceit-blasting questions Paul poses to the Corinthians: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?"