

Meritocracy and Friendliness (*mettā*)

Mariana Ferreira da Silva Venâncio

Campus Fryslân, University of Groningen

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drs. Friso L.S. Timmenga

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Abstract

The concept of meritocracy has faced criticism in academia, as it rewards individuals based on their abilities, efforts, and accomplishments. While meritocracy promotes social mobility and equal opportunities, scholars argue that factors beyond one's control, such as family background and discrimination, influence a person's merit. Despite acknowledging the impact of non-meritocratic elements on access to opportunities, meritocracy remains widely supported. However, ignoring these factors ignores and thus perpetuates structural inequalities. The narrative of the 'self-made man' exacerbates these issues, fuelling hubris among the elite and contributing to despair among disadvantaged individuals. In this paper, I present an alternative perspective by exploring the philosophical teachings of the Pāli discourses of the Buddha. I argue that overemphasizing personal effort creates an illusion of control, which causes despair given the unattainable nature of illusions. By examining the practice of friendliness (*mettā*), I criticise meritocracy from a philosophical standpoint. The paper introduces friendliness and its relevant philosophical concepts, analyses the history and principles of meritocracy, discusses its strengths and shortcomings, and reflects on how the concepts of impermanence (*anicca*), no-self (*anattā*), and vulnerability provide insights into the limitations of meritocracy.

Keywords: meritocracy, Buddhist philosophy, friendliness, Pāli Canon, philosophy

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Introduction

The concept of meritocracy has come under severe scrutiny within academia. Meritocracy is a system that rewards individuals based on their abilities, talents, efforts, and accomplishments. These rewards encompass economic goods, political power, influence, and career advancement. Unlike nepotistic and aristocratic systems, meritocratic systems are known for their promotion of social mobility and equality of opportunity for all members to advance based on their merit (Hirsch et al., 2002; Bellows, 2009; Castilla and Benard, 2010; Poocharoen and Brillantes, 2013; Imbroscio, 2016; Costa, 2023). However, scholars have started to challenge the notion that a person's merit, which can be reflected in, for example, their credentials, is not only informed by the commonly accepted notion of merit as talent plus effort, but also by factors outside a person's control (Reynolds and Xian, 2014; Clycq et al., 2014; Warikoo and Fuhr, 2014; Zhang, 2015). Particularly, Reynolds and Xian (2014) claim there are two hidden dimensions for the purpose of getting ahead in life in a meritocratic system. On the one hand, there exists meritocratic elements, namely hard work, ambition, and having a good education. Americans, for example, rate these three elements as the most determining factors in predicting success (Reynolds and Xian, 2014). On the other hand, there are non-meritocratic elements which are further divided into two categories: 'friends and family' and 'discrimination' (Reynolds and Xian, 2014). The former concerns coming from a wealthy family, having well-educated parents, knowing the right people, and having political connections, while the latter considers a person's race, a person's religion, and being born a man or woman (Reynolds and Xian, 2014).

Despite the academic community having increasingly acknowledged non-meritocratic factors have a significant impact on access to opportunities in a meritocratic society, which contradicts the fundamental principles of the meritocratic ideal, meritocracy has remained a highly supported system in societies around world (Lipsey, 2014; Wiederkehr et al., 2015;

Wooldridge, 2021). In fact, political representatives across the ideological spectrum have increasingly incorporated and promoted the meritocratic ideal in their rhetoric (Lipsey, 2004; Panayotakis, 2014; Sandel, 2020; Mark, 2020).

However, it is damaging to our social harmony to gloss over the significant role non-meritocratic factors play in generating profound inequalities within society, including limited access to social capital and resources – there is an excessive emphasis in the role personal effort plays to determining individuals' circumstances. The notion of the 'self-made man', which portrays personal effort as the sole determinant of success, is a misleading and potentially harmful narrative. Namely, according to Sandel's (2020) analysis of meritocracy and its limitations, this narrative has resulted in two significant consequences: first, it has fuelled hubris among the elite; second, it has led to an increase in 'deaths of despair' among the most disadvantaged members of society. Both factors have contributed to the erosion of social cohesion (Sandel, 2020).

In this regard, I present an additional perspective to further the claim that overemphasizing the role of effort in shaping life circumstances has damaging and undesirable effects. By placing excessive emphasis on personal effort, we create an illusion of control which is by nature, ultimately unattainable. Living in a society that not only ignores this impossibility but makes people act as if it was possible to control phenomena creates a damaging, vicious cycle of suffering. As such, I further argue for the relevance of embracing and regarding the meritocratic ideal for what it is: an illusion.

This perspective stems from a philosophical perspective, namely through an exploration of the teachings in the Pāli discourses of the Buddha. This philosophical account contrast with the mainstream sociological analysis of the meritocratic ideal. To support the claim that control is impossible I will engage in an exploration of the philosophical implications of the practice of friendliness (*mettā*) which is put forward by the Pāli Canon.

This paper starts by briefly introducing friendliness (*mettā*) and the specific philosophical concepts found most relevant to engage with meritocracy, which are derived by Andrea Sangiacomo's *An Introduction to Friendliness (mettā): Emotional Intelligence and Freedom in the Pāli Discourses of the Buddha* (2022). Thereafter, I provide an analysis of meritocracy, namely its history, political relevance and key principles. This analysis places a particular focus on how the definition of merit has changed and what its implications are. The two following sections lay out the arguments for the superiority and the shortcomings of meritocracy. The former is mostly derived on the reading of Adrian Wooldridge's *The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World* (2021), which emphasizes the financial and moral values of upholding the meritocratic ideal. The latter is informed by an analysis of Michael Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020), which attributes the contemporary societal and political division in Western nations to meritocracy. Finally, I engage in a philosophical reflection on how concepts from the practice of *mettā*, namely impermanence (*anicca*), no-self (*anattā*) and vulnerability provide a relevant perspective to addressing meritocracy's promotion of perceived control.

Scope

This paper engages only with the Buddhist philosophical tradition of the Pāli discourses. The Pāli Canon is, however, known as the most comprehensive and intact collection of early Buddhist teachings that exists today (Harvey, 1990; Marguire, 2001). This work is also limited to introducing and exploring the contemplation of impermanence (*anicca*), 'no-self' (*anattā*), and vulnerability, but it does not intend to layout how the practice of *mettā* creates conditions for achieving such realizations. Furthermore, although I explore Buddhist philosophical accounts that ultimately challenge the fundamental notions of success held in ordinary life, including those held within meritocratic systems, exploring and

criticizing whether any particular meritocratic notion of success is worthy of pursuit is outside the scope of this paper.

Buddhist Philosophy: the Pāli Canon

This paper will provide an account of friendliness (*mettā*) in Buddhist philosophy by specifically referring to teachings from the Pāli discourses of the Buddha. The Pāli Canon, preserved in the Pāli language, serves as the standard collection of scriptures in the Theravada Buddhist tradition (Gombrich, 2006). This ancient canon represents the most comprehensive and intact collection of early Buddhist teachings that exists today (Harvey, 1990; Marguire, 2001). All references and readings from the discourses of the Buddha are sourced from the primary collections of the *Suttapiṭaka* and the *Khuddaka Nikāya* (Minor Collection). Although there is a vast difference between the modern Western world and the ancient north-Indian culture from around 2500 years ago, where these discourses originated, they remarkably offer precise, comprehensive, sophisticated, and insightful guidance in the addressing matters of human suffering (Sangiaco, 2022). By focusing on the ground of the Pāli discourses, we can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their relevance and wisdom even in our contemporary context.

The information regarding the Pāli discourses and their exploration in this study is based on the reading and analysis of *An Introduction to Friendliness (mettā): Emotional Intelligence and Freedom in the Pāli Discourses of the Buddha* by Andrea Sangiacomo (2022). Sangiacomo work serves as an introductory guide on utilising some key teachings preserved in the early Buddhist texts to unlock a novel perspective of and approach to experiencing reality (Sangiaco, 2022).

The Practice of Friendliness (*mettā*)

The purpose of focusing on the practice of friendliness (*mettā*) is to delve into the philosophical implications of this practice and its significance in enhancing our

comprehension of meritocracy and (in addressing) its shortcomings. In its basic form, friendliness entails perceiving any painful or unpleasant aspect of experience as an indicator of vulnerability and fragility, which requires care, attentiveness, and the ability to remain present with it (Sangiaco, 2022). Friendliness possesses the wisdom to recognize that opposing attitudes – namely aversion or the desire to seek distraction from the unpleasant – actually contribute to the production, intensification, amplification, and perpetuation of all forms of unpleasantness (Sangiaco, 2022). Therefore, friendliness offers a pathway to transcend any unpleasantness (i.e., any problem) by learning to abide with it, without the need to escape or avoid (Sangiaco, 2022).

When engaging with the Pāli discourses, it becomes evident that they have a very precise agenda centered around a primary point: ultimate liberation (Sangiaco, 2022). A way to characterize this liberation is to view it as a profound and transformative shift in how one understands and interprets their own experiences (Sangiaco, 2022). This transformation is as profound as awakening from a dream and being able to discern, with clarity, what was a dream from what constitutes awake experience (Sangiaco, 2022). Having understood the dream as merely a dream, an illusion, it becomes impossible to believe in it or accept it at face value, as one did while still dreaming (Sangiaco, 2022). Thus, despite there being a continuity in the structure of experience, as both the dream and the awakened state remain essentially an instance of the fact that some content of experience is appearing, there is a profound shift in the meaning that experience assumes (Sangiaco, 2022).

Given the soteriological nature of the practice of friendliness, one might question the relevance or compatibility of drawing connections between the philosophical reflections of this practice and meritocracy, a system of organising collective human affairs. According to Sangiaco (2022):

(...) complete awakening is the complete and irreversible extinction of greed, aversion, and ignorance. These three attitudes are responsible for shaping and giving meaning to ordinary experience; their extinction is thus a waking up from that construction. Understanding this point entails realizing that there is something inherently wrong with the way in which ordinary beings (humans or not) are bound and even attached to greed, aversion, and ignorance as their default way of dealing with any experience. (p. 53)

From this perspective, awakening is not an isolated transcendental event; instead, it involves a complete transformation of one's core attitudes towards all contents of experience. Awakening does not demand any special metaphysical or mystical unveiling, but rather represents the most profound revolution in how we perceive and comprehend reality *in this very life* (Sangiaco, 2022). In this sense, there is still some level of resemblance in the distinction between awakened and ordinary experience. Its fundamental difference lies, rather, in a soteriological assumption about ordinary life.

As such, from the perspective of the Pāli discourses of the Buddha, the task set for this paper is inherently flawed. Not only is this work written from a perspective of ordinary experience, which is regarded as "inherently wrong," it also 'transports' and attempts to apply philosophical insights of a soteriological nature to understanding a system that upholds and exists within ordinary experience. The ordinary perspective "(...) presupposes that one does not see any inherent problems with the ordinary condition of human (and non-human) beings." (Sangiaco, 2022, p. 55) There is potential for improving circumstances or optimizing structures; to better conduct tasks or prevent events from occurring, but the underlying notion is that things are ultimately satisfactory as they are (Sangiaco, 2022). Living in a meritocracy means living in a system that upholds individual attitudes of aversion, greed, and ignorance towards contents of experience. Therefore, any attempt to

argue for the significance of meritocracy is, even if its value is deemed to increase by the philosophical insight provided by friendliness, ultimately conflicting with the purpose of friendliness itself. Nonetheless, as long as one awards philosophy the responsibility to shake off seemingly obvious views and to cultivate a critical attitude, one can find value in this endeavor.

While Sangiacomo's work aims at illustrating how friendliness can be a vehicle for liberation, that is outside the scope of this paper. Rather, I will mainly explore the philosophical implications of this practice that I regard most relevant for engaging with the meritocratic ideal. These elements are the concepts of impermanence/uncertainty (*anicca*), 'no-self' (*anattā*) and vulnerability.

Uncertainty (anicca)

The characteristic of *anicca*, often translated as 'non-permanence' or 'uncertainty,' is commonly portrayed as the notion that phenomena are in a constant state of flux, with their constituent elements arising and ceasing at an exceedingly rapid rate (Sangiaco, 2022). These descriptions appear to stem from the commentarial tradition and *Abhidhamma* thought, which extensively analyse phenomena as fleeting 'mind-moments' that arise and cease swiftly (Sangiaco, 2022). However, in the original discourses, there is no indication that the frequency or speed of change should be considered the defining aspect of *anicca*. (Sangiaco, 2022). The significance of *anicca* lies in the recognition that change is structurally encoded in the nature of phenomena (Sangiaco, 2022). This means that the fact that phenomena arise inherently implies that they must eventually cease ("Yaṃ kiñci samudayadhammaṃ sabbaṃ taṃ nirodhadhammaṃ") (Sangiaco, 2022, p. 224). Consequently, any attempt to cling to or possess phenomena becomes futile, as they will inevitably fade away regardless of one's desires or pretences (Sangiaco, 2022). *Anicca* encompasses more than general changeability or the speed of change; it denotes the structural

feature by which any experiential content is fundamentally and structurally uncertain and therefore impossible to own/appropriate (Sangiaco, 2022).

‘No-self’ (anattā)

The concept of *anattā*, commonly translated as ‘no-self’ or ‘no-soul,’ can be understood in various ways (Sangiaco, 2022). One interpretation views it as an ontological teaching that delves into the nature and existence of a specific entity, the self (Sangiaco, 2022). This perspective opens debates regarding the exact nature of the self that the Buddha denies, whether it encompasses only an eternal transcendental Soul found in later Vedic thought or extends to ordinary expressions of selfhood (Sangiaco, 2022). However, within the practice of friendliness and from Sangiaco’s analysis, selfhood can be primarily understood as a manifestation of intentional actions based on aversion, desire, and ignorance (Sangiaco, 2022). The sense of ‘I am’ emerges from the act of constructing and associating oneself with the contents of experience (Sangiaco, 2022). Similarly, appropriation is not solely an ontological state or relationship but a conscious approach of treating experience as if it can be controlled and mastered by an individual (Sangiaco, 2022). From this viewpoint, *anattā* is best understood not as an ontological doctrine but as a practical discipline that aims to transform one's intentional attitudes towards experience (Sangiaco, 2022).

The type of appropriation that the Buddha addresses in his teachings pertains to an adversarial form of appropriation, wherein individuals seek to subject the contents of experience to their own control (Sangiaco, 2022). This form of appropriation can be distinguished from the subjective perspective inherent in the structure of conscious experience (Sangiaco, 2022). This subjective perspective allows for the indexing of contents to a specific field, acknowledging that they occur ‘here’ rather than elsewhere. While this subjective perspective is inevitable and necessary for any experience, it does not

inherently support the more forceful form of appropriation and control that tends to interpret the subjective perspective in personal and dramatic terms (Sangiaco, 2022).

Vulnerability

Recognizing vulnerability entails understanding that no aspect of experience can truly be claimed as ‘mine’ (Sangiaco, 2022). The narrative of appropriation, wherein one assumes the role of the main character entitled to possess, fight, conquer, and possibly lose, is revealed as nothing more than a story or an illusion (Sangiaco, 2022). By refraining from appropriating any content, the uncertainty and disharmony they carry cease to be ‘my’ problem (or anyone else’s). The realization that this does not belong to ‘myself’ (*anattā*) paves the way for genuine freedom to unfold (Sangiaco, 2022).

Aging, sickness, death, and separation are inevitable realities faced by all living beings (Sangiaco, 2022). Typically, they are viewed as states to be avoided at all costs, preferably ignored when they seem distant (Sangiaco, 2022). We strive to construct our own experiences to shield ourselves from encountering these fundamental aspects – a basic refusal to confront their undeniable and inescapable nature (Sangiaco, 2022). Unfortunately, aversion, greed, and ignorance only contribute to unskillful actions, attitudes, and beliefs, exacerbating the problem and perpetuating vicious cycles (Sangiaco, 2022). This is because trying to control an already inherently uncertain situation simply adds yet a new condition which is also impermanent (*anicca*).

The realm of actions and intentionality is where everything is determined. It is within this domain that we can reassess our habitual patterns of reactions and coactions, taking a step back to cultivate alternative attitudes – friendliness is one such attitude (Sangiaco, 2022). It does not serve as a means of escaping vulnerability or disregarding it. Rather, friendliness contemplates the fragility of existence and seeks to understand how it should be embraced and handled (Sangiaco, 2022). Friendliness embodies a gesture of kindness and

understanding towards that which is on the brink of mutation or even destruction (*anicca*) (Sangiaco, 2022). Instead of delving deeper into vulnerability and exploring its causes, friendliness challenges the notion that vulnerability itself is the true problem; it posits that aversion is the core issue (Sangiaco, 2022).

Vulnerability encompasses two dimensions (Sangiaco, 2022). First, there is a universal predicament in which all living beings inevitably find themselves – an exposure to unpleasantness, pain, and suffering (Sangiaco, 2022). There is no way to entirely avoid or escape this situation (Sangiaco, 2022). However, the most adverse aspect lies in exacerbating and entangling oneself with this suffering through unskillful reactions (Sangiaco, 2022). In place of desperate possessiveness, friendliness cultivates a profound sense of gratitude, nourished by the realization that whatever is received may not have been received at all, and it can be lost at any moment. There is no entitlement to possess or retain it (Sangiaco, 2022).

The true problem is not constituted by aging, sickness, death, and separation themselves. Rather, it lies in one's attitude of appropriating youth, health, life, and cherished possessions as if they were personal property, fully subject to one's control. Appropriation is the genuine problem that requires our attention.

Meritocracy

The concept of meritocracy can often be contested given the multiple contexts in which it is applied. Most sources (Hirsch et al., 2002; Bellows, 2009; Castilla and Benard, 2010; Poocharoen and Brillantes, 2013; Imbroscio, 2016; Costa, 2023) as a social, political and/or economic system that distributes rewards according to individuals' merit. Merit can be regarded as one's ability, talent, effort and accomplishments. Rewards include economic goods, political power, influence, and career progression. In a meritocracy, all members have the opportunity to be recognized and advance in proportion to their merit. This notion

presupposes social mobility and equality of opportunity, unlike nepotistic and aristocratic systems, where individuals advance according to familial background, and economic and social status.

It is important to note that the concept of merit and the practice of meritocracy may vary across different societies, cultures, and contexts. The understanding of merit within a society can differ, and the implementation of meritocracy can exhibit significant variations between Western and Asian countries, as well as among individuals within and between these contexts (Kim and Choi, 2017).

Historical Background

The concept of meritocracy has roots dating back centuries, although the term itself is relatively recent. Major scholars such as Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, and John Stuart Mill delved into the concept in their respective works. Confucius, during Imperial China in 200 B.C., established a merit-based civil service system that replaced hereditary nobility with merit and integrity as the basis for administrative appointments (Sienkewicz, 2003). Plato and Aristotle also espoused meritocracy in their political philosophies. Plato advocated for the rule of the wisest, proposing philosopher kings as ideal rulers, while Aristotle argued that citizens with merit should have a greater influence in governance (Estlund, 2003). The idea of meritocracy then extended to British India in the 17th century, and the British Empire became the first European power to successfully implement a meritocratic civil service (Kazin et al., 2010). Additionally, in 1813, Thomas Jefferson in the United States advocated for a "natural aristocracy" comprised of talented and virtuous individuals to govern, while John Stuart Mill argued for granting more voting rights to educated citizens (Mill, 1995; Estlund, 2003; Lemann, 2019).

The term 'meritocracy' was eventually coined by sociologist Alan Fox in 1956 and popularised by British politician and sociologist Michael Young in his satirical essay *The*

Rise of the Meritocracy in 1958 (Littler, 2017). The term is derived from the Latin word “meritum” meaning “reward or punishment earned by action” and the suffix “-cracy” from the Greek word “kratos” meaning “rule, strength, power” (Dictionary.com, n.d).

Meritocracy as an Ideology

The notion of meritocracy as a societal framework has faced significant scrutiny due to increasing social inequality in the 21st century. Scholars have criticized meritocracy, labelling it both as a political ideology and an illusion (Panayotakis, 2014; Kim and Choi, 2017). Meritocracy has become a recurring theme in political rhetoric, with politicians from various ideological backgrounds consistently emphasizing the idea that benefits and opportunities in life, such as wealth, influence, employment, and access to higher education, should be allocated based on individuals' abilities and hard work (Sandel, 2020; Mark, 2020). This reveals the multifaceted nature of the modern understanding of meritocracy, as described by Littler (2017). On one hand, it represents a societal framework where individuals are acknowledged and progress based on their skills and hard work, assuming equal opportunities and social mobility. On the other hand, meritocracy can also be seen as an ideological discourse rooted in distinct belief systems, resulting in different interpretations, including social democratic and neoliberal perspectives (Littler, 2017). The concept of ‘achievement ideology’ further reinforces the notion of meritocracy as an ideology, since it revolves around the belief that success in society is achieved through diligent work and education. According to this perspective, factors such as gender, race and ethnicity, economic background, social networks, or geographical location are considered secondary to merit or entirely inconsequential in the pursuit of success (Barnes, 2002).

Meritocracy and Justice

Meritocracy has gradually emerged as a positive ideal in Western cultures, serving as a benchmark to assess institutional fairness (Allen, 2011; Kim and Choi, 2017). The essence

of meritocracy lies in the distribution of rewards, whether they be jobs, power, money, or authority, based on individual merit, and this principle can be considered one of the earliest theories of distributive justice (Liu, 2011). Moreover, the concept of meritocracy as a system of distributive justice highlights the various forms that meritocratic systems can assume.

Daniels (1978) suggests that when narrowing the focus to the distribution of income, different types of meritocracies may arise, depending on the desired reward schedule. These include unbridled meritocracy, desert meritocracy, utilitarian meritocracy, maximin meritocracy, strict egalitarian meritocracy, and socialist meritocracy.

Key Meritocratic Principles

Merit

The implementation of meritocratic systems depends heavily on reaching a consensus on what defines merit and how it should be evaluated (S'liwa and Johansson, 2014). As a result, the notion of merit may vary across nations and institutions based on specific circumstances (Park and Liu, 2014). Similarly, meritocracy itself can differ depending on the understanding of merit, the policies employed, and the way it is practiced in diverse contexts and cultures (Kim and Choi, 2017).

According to Levinson et al. (2002), the most common understanding of meritocracy often defines merit as evaluated competency and ability, typically assessed through measures such as IQ or standardized achievement tests (e.g., SATs, credentials) (Young, 1961). Individual talent and inherent ability are also often equated with merit (Conrad, 1976; Wooldridge, 2021). In this sense, merit concerns both cognitive capacity and the exertion of hard work, as implied by Young's original definition of the term; merit equals intelligence plus effort (Young, 1961).

One crucial aspect to consider is the relative influence of cognitive capacity and effort in determining merit within contemporary Western societies. Young's perspective in 1958

emphasized ability as the primary determining factor, while Allen (2011) challenges this notion by asserting that effort outweighs ability. This disparity arises from differing views on the malleability of human capacity. Young viewed human ability as relatively fixed, where effort merely refined inherent traits dictated by biology and chance. Consequently, success was considered largely influenced by factors beyond individual control. However, Allen contends that the perception of fixed human ability has evolved, with ability now seen as highly malleable. Accordingly, an individual's progress and social allocation is regarded as their personal responsibility, since exerting effort enables them to enhance inherent talents and even create new ones.

Distributive Justice and Social Mobility

Meritocratic systems were not always considered fair, primarily because they originated from a desire to optimize human performance within the civil system (Allen, 2011). The allocation of positions based on merit involved a somewhat arbitrary factor, as ability was believed to be relatively fixed and beyond one's control (Young, 1961; Allen, 2011). However, this approach ensured that the most suitable individuals were assigned to respective roles, thereby promoting the effective functioning of institutions and securing the welfare of the public (Bentham, 1830). Likewise, in the past, individuals often attributed their economic and social circumstances to external factors beyond their influence. This paradoxically fostered a unique sense of inner peace and personal contentment, despite ongoing calls for greater equality. As Allen (2011, p. 5) notes, the previous system was deemed “‘unjust’ because it was *unjustly unequal*.”

With a stronger regard for effort in determining one's merit, the responsibility for meritocratic reallocation and social mobility has shifted from administrative overview to the individual (Allen, 2011). This has had two implications. First, it promoted competition (Allen, 2011). Given that meritocratic distribution occurs according to the principle that “The

most talented should receive a greater share of society's rewards than the less talented" (Liu, 2011, p. 387), people are now encouraged to do their best, which in turn makes them achieve the ultimate goals of society (Conrad, 1976; Kim and Choi, 2017). Second, it turned what was before considered an unjust society into a *justly unequal* society because, regardless of the inequality of outcome, individuals saw a genuine opportunity to move up the social hierarchy given the malleability of their inherent talents. The rhetoric "You can make if you try" became increasingly popular and endorsed by several politicians (Sandel, 2020, p. 26). Likewise, with people now being able to take ownership over their abilities and to put in the effort to reposition themselves came the need to provide a level playing field so everyone could have an equal chance at mastering their abilities and competing for the position that would allow them to contribute to society.

Equality of Opportunity

In a meritocracy, "impartial competition" and "equality of opportunity" are fundamental elements, as explained by Young (Talib and Fitzgerald, 2015). The absence of equality of opportunity undermines the realization of an ideal society that people aspire to. To achieve social mobility in an ideal meritocratic society, a fair and transparent system that combats corruption is necessary. Consequently, the principles of "equality" and "fairness" are commonly integrated into the employment practices of many Anglo-Saxon countries, as noted by So (2015) (Kim and Choi, 2017). Notably, the analysis conducted by the authors underscores the significance of "equality of opportunity" as the most critical aspect of meritocracy. Numerous studies (Panayotakis, 2014; Lipsey, 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Talib and Fitzgerald, 2015; So, 2015) highlight that fostering harmony in a meritocratic society heavily relies on the value of equality of opportunity. The establishment of a meritocratic society that facilitates equality of opportunity also necessitates transparency and impartiality as essential prerequisites (Kim and Choi, 2017).

Proponents of Meritocracy

It is commonly acknowledged that the principles that have guided Western societies for the past centuries are beginning to weaken. Democracy, liberalism, and capitalism are all facing challenges. However, the idea that a person's social position should be determined by their abilities and hard work still enjoys widespread support (Wooldridge, 2021). According to Wooldridge (2021), the popularity of meritocracy can be attributed to the four commendable qualities that characterise meritocratic societies.

Firstly, it values the extent to which people can get ahead in life based on their inherent abilities. Social scientists often refer to this as the “bootstrap ideology,” evoking the popular notion of “pulling” oneself “up by the bootstraps” (Crossman, 2020). Secondly, it aims to secure equality of opportunity for all by reducing barriers of access to education. Thirdly, it prohibits discrimination based on irrelevant traits such as race or gender. Lastly, it ensures job opportunities are awarded based on open competition as opposed to nepotism (Wooldridge, 2021). In this context, meritocratic systems contrast with aristocracies, where individuals advance on the basis of family status, titles and other connections (Crossman, 2020). Overall, in modern society, the ideology of merit has given low-status group members the hope of improving their financial and social status by putting in the effort to cultivate their talents and abilities (Wiederkehr et al., 2015; Crossman, 2020). Meritocracy has therefore stood as a tool for meritocratic upward mobility which maintains social order and mitigates social unrest (Kim and Choi, 2017).

Although the meritocratic ideal still enjoys unwavering civic support, it has come to face intense scrutiny from a group of well-established scholars who denounce the ruling ideology as an “illusion,” a “trap,” a “tyranny,” and an instrument of white oppression (Wooldridge, 2021). However, proponents of this societal framework highlight the key question is not whether meritocracy is flawed, but whether it has fewer flaws compared to

other systems. They do not claim it to be bulletproof; they assert that meritocracy performs better than alternative structures in balancing diverse objectives that inherently conflict with one another (Wooldridge, 2021). These objectives include, for example, social justice, and economic efficiency, and personal ambition, and finite opportunities (Wooldridge, 2021). Most importantly still, the triumph of meritocracy lies in its ability to reconcile the two major tensions at the core of modern society: on one hand, it balances efficiency and fairness, and on the other, moral equality and social differentiation (Wooldridge, 2021). By screening job applicants based on competence, meritocracy seeks to ensure qualified individuals secure their appropriate positions, while simultaneously affording every individual the opportunity to participate in the sorting process and thus to have a fair chance at success (Wooldridge, 2021). Furthermore, this process strives to safeguard the well-being of communities as it ensures crucial products, for instance vaccines, are developed, tested, and regulated by highly trained professionals (Wooldridge, 2021).

Meritocracy has a strong economic argument in its favour: nations governed by the best and brightest tend to be more financially prosperous. Research shows that meritocratic civil services, such as those in Singapore, with predictable and rewarding career ladders, are associated with higher economic growth rates (UNDP, 2015). The Scandinavian countries, too, maintain their positions at the top of the international league tables for prosperity and productivity because of their commitment to education, good government, and competition (Wooldridge, 2021). This impression is backed by cross-country surveys. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has repeatedly demonstrated that high social mobility promotes economic growth. Data collected by Nicholas Bloom of Stanford University and John Van Reenen of the London School of Economics (2007) show that countries that recruit professional managers through open competition have higher growth rates than those that favour amateur managers recruited through personal connections.

These findings are corroborated by the highly influential 1997 World Development Report, which stated that "Making a meritocracy of the civil service helps bring in high-quality staff, confers prestige on civil service positions, and can do a great deal to motivate good performance" (World Bank 1997, 92). Contrastingly, "Where promotions are personalized or politicized, civil servants worry more about pleasing their superiors or influential politicians, and efforts to build prestige through tough recruitment standards are undercut" (World Bank 1997, 93). Likewise, the significant impact of the meritocratic rhetoric of rising on the ambition of public servants contributes to building dynamic and reliable public services, which are fundamental to the successful achievement of national and worldwide objectives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNDP, 2015).

According to Wooldridge (2021), the strongest argument in favour of meritocracy is not economic, but rather moral. Human beings possess unique talents and abilities that can be refined through hard work and dedication, setting us apart from "mere lumps of flesh and blood" (Wooldridge, 2021). Although we are all equal in moral value and possess certain rights as humans, such as the right to vote or to free speech, we are also the architects of our own destinies, shaping ourselves through our struggles against the obstacles that life throws our way (Wooldridge, 2021). Treating people as equal or helpless victims of circumstance belittles their humanity and undermines their agency (Wooldridge, 2021).

Paradoxically, treating people as moral equals also means acknowledging their capacity for moral agency and hence the potential for social inequality that comes with it (Wooldridge, 2021). Meritocracy offers a solution to this paradox by encouraging individuals to develop their talents and rewarding them based on their abilities (Wooldridge, 2021). In doing so, it acknowledges and respects their autonomy as self-governing individuals capable of willing their circumstances while also benefiting their communities (Wooldridge, 2021).

Ultimately, the meritocratic ideal is widely perceived as a desirable model. The rationale is straightforward: the most competent individuals will achieve the best outcomes, leading to the maximization of civic welfare. Meritocracy is therefore viewed as a fair and equitable system that benefits both individuals and society. By creating opportunities for talented and diligent people from all backgrounds to advance and make meaningful contributions to society, meritocracy can foster social mobility and provide a powerful incentive for citizens to strive for excellence and unlock their full potential (UNDP, 2015).

Summary of *The Tyranny of Merit*

One notable contemporary critic of meritocracy, however, is Michael Sandel, author of the book *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020). In this work, Sandel criticises the concept of meritocracy by contesting the extent to which we live in fully realised meritocratic societies and by scrutinising the meritocratic principle itself. Firstly, Sandel claims that our societies do not live up to the meritocratic ideal. The notion of genuine equality of opportunity is non-existent, as factors such as wealth, race, gender, and social class still play a significant role in determining an individual's success.

Secondly, Sandel claims that the meritocratic principle that “people deserve the rewards they get by exercising their talents in a market society” is flawed in several ways. Sandel supports these claims arguing from both philosophical and political perspectives. He starts by asking the reader to render the actuality of equality of opportunity, or what he calls a ‘fair race.’ In a fair race it would be predictable that the winners would be the most gifted. However, given that talent is a matter of luck rather than desert, it becomes difficult to argue people deserve the benefits from their talent. Moreover, living in a society at a time when there is great demand for the talents one happens to have is not one’s own doing either. The meritocratic principle is therefore flawed since being talented and having such talents being prized are, in fact, matters of chance rather than merit.

Sandel then brings in a political implication of the meritocratic ideal, namely the corrosive effect that meritocratic hubris has on the common good. Sandel introduces the concept of meritocratic hubris and defines it as the tendency of the successful to inhale too deeply of their success. This attitude leads to a disregard for the luck that helped them on their way and their indebtedness to those who made their achievements possible. Besides it being a morally unattractive attitude, the author claims that meritocratic hubris has a corrosive effect on the common good because it deepens the divide between winners and losers. This corrosion of the common good is what Sandel ultimately deems to be a kind of tyranny. Consequently, attaining the ideal of equality of opportunity would make the sense of meritocratic hubris potentially (and paradoxically) grow even more pronounced, as both winners and losers would come to perceive the successful to have truly earned their accomplishments and rewards. In turn, this enhancement of meritocratic hubris would further erode social esteem and solidarity. This analysis therefore unveils society's fundamental issue: our image of social life as a competitive race.

After unpacking and assessing the concept of meritocracy, Sandel draws a connection between this ideology and neoliberal globalisation. Meritocracy has gained traction in mainstream public discourse amid the widening inequalities of wealth and income exacerbated by market-driven globalisation. According to Sandel, who draws for Max Weber's analysis, the winners of globalisation are seldom satisfied with the rewards brought by their victorious status. They also seek the meritocratic sense of entitlement and legitimacy over their successes, a notion used to justify the winners' outsized share of wealth. In turn, this view aggravates the divide between the winners and losers of globalisation, as by convincing oneself that one's deserving of their success one is allowed to believe that those less fortunate also purely bear their due.

Sandel then traces this attitude towards market success back to religious origins. The secular interpretation of meritocracy as a means of achieving success through individual merit and effort mirrors the Calvinist notion of predestination, in which an individual's salvation was predetermined by God regardless of their actions.

In response to widening economic inequalities, centre, left- and right-wing parties have promoted the idea of individual upward mobility through higher education. This rhetoric of rising suggests that the solution to job stagnation and job loss due to outsourcing is to improve oneself by obtaining a university degree. However, this approach also carries an implicit insult to those who are struggling in the new economy without a four-year college certificate. The message seems to be that one's failure to succeed is one's own doing, and this harsh judgment has contributed to much of the anger, resentment, and sense of grievance against the meritocratic elites. This resentment has fuelled the populist backlash that is evident in the election of figures such as Donald Trump, the Brexit vote, and the rise of right-wing populist parties. This backlash poses a threat to democracy itself, as it reflects a rejection of the meritocratic system that underpins modern liberal democracy. Furthermore, Sandel claims that meritocratic elites often forget the fact that most citizens do not hold university degrees. It is therefore folly to make a university degree a necessary condition for dignified work and a decent life, as this approach fails to recognise the value of non-college-educated workers and their contributions to society.

Another consideration is that individual upward mobility through higher education cannot fully compensate for widening economic inequalities. While meritocracy may equip people with the skills and credentials needed to compete in climbing the "ladder of success," it neglects the fact that the rungs on the ladder are growing further apart. To address this issue in a serious and effective manner we must directly reckon with the inequalities of wealth and power that underlie this trend. According to Sandel, this means shifting the terms of public

discourse from a focus on arming people for meritocratic competition to focusing on affirming the dignity of work.

Shifting the mainstream public narrative requires asking the key question of how to ensure that individuals who lack formal credentials can still find meaningful work that allows them to support their families, contribute to their communities, and receive social recognition for their efforts. Sandel argues that first, we need to fundamentally rethink the role of higher education as arbiters of opportunity. Currently, colleges confer the credentials and define the merit that a market-driven meritocracy rewards, effectively serving as sorting machines that entrench inequality and privilege. Hence, society must broaden access to higher education and find ways to lower the stakes of the competitive "meritocratic tournament" that determines who gets admitted to elite universities. But more importantly, society must promote, fund, and honour vocational and technical training. These are currently undervalued but critical learning avenues that most citizens depend upon to prepare themselves for the world of work. Failure to prioritise constricts economic opportunities for those who do not aspire to a university diploma and reflects the credentialism prejudices of those who govern.

Moreover, Sandel claims the myth brought by meritocratic hubris – that the best and brightest are better at governing than their less credentialed citizens – is deeply flawed. Good governance requires practical wisdom and civic virtue, not just technocratic expertise. It is important to recognise that the capacity for moral judgment, which demands moral character and expertise, does not necessarily correlate with the ability to score well on standardised tests or gain admission to elite institutions. Still, only very few of the 60-70% of citizens who do not hold a university diploma find their way to institutions of representative government. Thus, and ultimately, the grievance against meritocratic elites has become compounded by a more insidious injury than wide economic disparities: the erosion of the dignity of work and social esteem connected to it.

The concept of the dignity of work is closely tied to how we measure the value of different job occupations. Work that is less valued by the market is seen as a lesser contribution to the common good, and as a result, less worthy of social recognition and esteem. This phenomenon, Sandel argues, has been embedded and reinforced not just by universities but also by the financialization of the economy. With the shift of economic activity from producing goods to managing money, finance now claims a growing share of profits compared to the "real economy," where the working class faces stagnant wages and job prospects. However, given the contestability of the market's verdicts, the outsourcing of our moral judgments to the markets about who's contributions really matter is not morally defensible. To address inequalities and polarisation, we need to therefore reconsider technocratic neoliberal conceptions of the common good and meritocratic attitudes towards success.

Renewing the dignity of work requires exercising our democratic citizenship and reclaiming from markets the moral question of what counts as a valuable contribution to the common good. To do so, we need to confront the underlying questions about our economic arrangements, namely what kinds of work are worthy of recognition and esteem and what we owe one another as citizens. We must address both questions because we cannot determine what counts as a contribution worth affirming without collective reasoning about the purposes and ends of the common life we share. To deliberate about our common purposes we need to, in turn, foster a sense of belonging and to see ourselves as members of the communities we are indebted too.

To conclude, the *Tyranny of Merit*'s ultimate analysis claims that market-driven globalisation and meritocratic conceptions of success have unravelled the moral and civic ties that hold our societies together. On the one hand, global supply chains, capital flows and the cosmopolitan identities that they foster have decreased our reliance on our fellow citizens,

making us less grateful for the contribution of others and less open to claims of social solidarity. On the other hand, meritocratic sorting has taught us that our success is our own doing, reinforcing the notion of self-sufficiency that has also eroded our sense of indebtedness and mutual responsibility. To renew our civic lives we must repair the social bonds the age of merit has undone.

Meritocracy in the Context of the Pāli Discourses

I agree that non-meritocratic factors play a role in meritocratic systems, and I also acknowledge the significance of chance in shaping one's life circumstances. However, accepting the role of chance is a peculiar observation because it is impossible to determine the exact extent to which events are influenced by chance. We have already established that nothing can be solely attributed to effort, as it is an impossibility. If the nature of phenomena in structurally impermanent (*anicca*), there is virtually no possibility for appropriating it and claiming it since it must eventually cease. On the other hand, some things can indeed be entirely attributed to chance. Recognizing this implies accepting the central role of chance. In fact, if anything can be attributed to chance, then everything is essentially governed by chance, as the possibility of chance is constantly present. This notion of everything being governed by chance can be compared to determinism, but my argument does not follow a deterministic perspective that denies personal choice and control over events. I contend that while individuals may not have control over what happens, they possess agency in choosing how to perceive experience.

Uncertainty (*anicca*) and Desert

Embracing the concept that everything is governed by chance negates the existence of desert or entitlement. For instance, one may say, "I did not deserve this promotion" or "I did not deserve to lose my job." Moreover, things simply exist as they are, without any personal connection to the self, as the self lacks the ability to prevent or manifest events. In the same

way that individuals cannot make something appear, they also cannot avoid something.

Therefore, both "I deserve" and "I do not deserve" hold true. Phenomena simply exist, devoid of personal attachment or significance.

It may seem peculiar to suggest that a person does not deserve their accomplishments. However, if we argue that people are not deserving of their negative circumstances, then we must accept the converse as equally valid. The reason this notion might strike us as odd or even incorrect is because of the moral and normative judgments currently associated with the concept of deserving. Deserving implies effort, and effort implies moral worth or the lack thereof. Yet, by asserting that everything is governed by chance, the idea of desert loses its logical foundation. Consequently, stating "I do not deserve" becomes an objective observation, devoid of any moral judgment regarding a person's worth. This leads us to question where we derive moral worth from in such a context. This is a question for another paper.

We have addressed the element of perceived individual control presupposed by the meritocratic ideal. Now, let us delve into the notions of entitlement and individuality itself, which are heavily present in Western meritocracies. Both these elements are connected to the overarching idea of appropriation.

Entitlement is a central concept in the understanding of meritocracy and has been extensively explored in *The Tyranny of Merit*. Sandel (2020) discusses entitlement and its connection to what he refers to as 'meritocratic hubris' exhibited by those who are most privileged. This hubris stems from a sense of pride and entitlement towards one's own success, such as career advancement, wealth, and credentials, primarily attributed to personal effort. Allen's claim that ability is now perceived as malleable, combined with my conclusion that we prioritize effort over innate ability, further emphasizes this notion. Sandel provides the example of the U.S. college admissions scandal and astutely observes that parents' focus

was not solely on their children being accepted into Ivy League universities but on their children's belief that their acceptance was awarded on their own merit. Simply being admitted was not enough; they needed to feel that they deserved it. People tend to avoid acknowledging the assistance they received in reaching their current position, as it diminishes their perceived competence. Accepting help can be seen as an insult to their sense of capability and self. The accomplishment must be solely attributed to themselves.

Challenging the idea that an achievement is a collective effort in a Western society also challenges the notions of individuality and perceived autonomy. We often associate our sense of purpose and agency with our accomplishments, forming identities that reflect various statuses such as professor, chef, wealthy, Nobel Prize winner, activist, and more. Therefore, let us explore the concept of selfhood from a Buddhist perspective.

No-self (*anattā*) and Individuality

If you see meritocracy has an illusion this sense of entitlement is, at least, sure to dim. Seeing meritocracy as an illusion means acknowledging the plethora of factors that play into determining one's circumstances. This also shows how entitlement is closely connected to an idea of individuality and self-sustenance.

The notion of the self-made man is commonly associated with the meritocratic ideal. It evokes the capacity for individual agency which is responsible for how much effort one dedicates to contributing to society, which in turn reflects the respective benefits one is deserving of. More importantly, however, the idea of the self-made man presumes and highlights the possibility to make oneself; the possibility to construct the self. Having taken notice of this contingency, friendliness claims that the reverse must be equally true, meaning, the non-construal of the self and thus the possibility for *anattā*, no-self. *Anattā* has several implications, but let us focus, for now, on its relevance to the notion of relatedness and interdependence.

If we consider the self as determined by nothing more than a set of circumstances, our intuitively individual and isolated conception of selfhood falls apart. Let us look at some examples. Faced with the query to introduce or define themselves, people tend to give an array of different, sometimes contradictory answers, answers which are also highly relative to the context in which the question is posed. A person might define themselves through their name, which happens to be nothing other than the result of another person's deliberation. This seemingly determined definition of the 'self' is inherently contingent on the existence of other selves, which arguably blurs the individual notion of selfhood. One's relationship status is another common way people use to define themselves, such as being a parent, a partner, a sibling, a cook, a Christian, a Portuguese citizen, an animal lover, etc. All former examples easily highlight how one's perception of oneself is not only intrinsically linked to but also dependent on a web of equally complex interdependencies, such as the interdependencies required for conceiving a nation-state or the biological world. Matter is also equally contingent on the existence of everything else that exists beyond itself. The stream flows because there are mountains and tides, our bodies (...). Ancient Buddhist philosophy, therefore, proves itself a highly relevant perspective from which to conceive the inherent relatedness and indebtedness that pervades one's existence.

Vulnerability

The diagnosis is as follows: people are increasingly dissatisfied with the notion that they have complete control over their circumstances and that their status is solely determined by their efforts and self-worth. Moreover, not only do individuals who are worse off feel negatively about themselves, but even those who are better off adopt the perception that their success is solely their responsibility. This erodes the sense of social esteem and solidarity. So, the crucial question arises: how can we improve people's well-being and alleviate their suffering?

To answer this question, we must delve into why people suffer, particularly within a meritocratic framework. However, rather than viewing this suffering as a consequence of arbitrary external forces obstructing individual success, it is necessary to explore it as an (unconscious) aversion reaction to events—a perception-based interpretation of suffering rather than an objective outcome of external circumstances. Adopting this perspective is crucial to acknowledging the inherent vulnerability of existence. Analysing suffering from this viewpoint enables us to address the concept of the meritocratic illusion and the questions raised by Sandel regarding the role of chance. Since chance is always present, there will always be instances where something undeserved "happens to" individuals.

The problem arises when we forget our vulnerabilities and believe they do not exist. How does this occur within a meritocratic system? Scholars in recent literature have increasingly labelled meritocracy as an ideology, even an illusion. When they refer to meritocracy as an illusion, it is because people are led to believe that there is nothing they cannot achieve if they put in the necessary work. This rhetoric assumes that individuals have complete control over their life circumstances. However, this belief is deeply flawed. The social sciences have scrutinized this claim extensively, recognizing that "non-meritocratic" factors systematically hinder marginalized individuals' agency to flourish and achieve success (eudaimonia). While it may be true that certain groups appear to be more vulnerable to external factors beyond their control hindering their pursuit of success, the reality is that every individual lacks the same agency.

By acknowledging these realities, we can start to address the vulnerabilities and suffering inherent in the meritocratic system. It requires a shift in perspective, recognizing that individuals are not responsible for their circumstances, and fostering a more compassionate and inclusive society that supports the well-being of all its members.

I acknowledge that this claim may appear to deny the existence of structural injustice. However, that is not my intention. Instead, I aim to discuss and emphasize, drawing from the Theravada Buddhist tradition, that all living and non-living beings lack agency over what happens to them (although it does not imply that individuals lack agency altogether; rather, their agency is limited when they fail to cultivate composure and separate events from their emotions - more on this later). Existing within a system, such as meritocracy, that claims otherwise obscures this fact. Consequently, we live our lives unaware of the inherent fragility of our existence and our self-proclaimed success and rewards. This leads us to handle our vulnerabilities inappropriately. We must not forget the reasons why we chose to live collectively in societies larger than any other animal species could establish – we sought refuge from the imminent threat of death that prevails in a state of nature. We are naturally driven to seek control, the ordinary experience is facilitated by aversion, desire and ignorance.

Embracing the Meritocratic Illusion

Living in society has the underlying effect of making most of us oblivious to the constant reality that we are vulnerable creatures prone to perish solely because we exist. Now, meritocracy is a peculiar system because, as mentioned earlier, it convinces individuals that they have control over their circumstances. This sense of control (which leads to entitlement, a topic we will discuss later) has, as scholars including Sandel have pointed out, resulted in people feeling worse about their status, particularly in cases of precarity (often referred to as 'deaths of despair') or anxiety (such as students and young people striving for financial stability and future accomplishments). As long as people believe in this meritocratic illusion, they suffer from a deep sense of pain and anxiety. After all, meritocracies are inherently unequal, and individuals are held solely accountable for their circumstances. This represents a significant departure from the aristocratic and nepotistic systems that

meritocracy aimed to replace. Scholars have observed that inequality (not unfairness) seems more tolerable when widely accepted as a result of factors beyond one's control. Furthermore, any hubristic sentiment is diminished, as people do not claim entitlement to inherited wealth or positions of influence. Individuals appeared to experience less suffering when they were aware that their share of resources was a result of "good" or "bad" luck. In this sense, aristocracies and nepotistic societies were more effective at fostering individual satisfaction or, at the very least, preventing personal turmoil because people were consciously aware of their lack of agency in ascending the social hierarchy.

This does not imply that we should revert to living in aristocratic or nepotistic societies. What I want to emphasize is how meritocracies, more so than aristocracy and nepotism, are designed to make individuals overlook their inherent vulnerability to external factors – chance – shaping their lives. Is this characteristic, which dismisses the role of chance, inherent to the concept of meritocracy? No, it is not. Firstly, we have discussed how Western meritocracies originated from a desire to maximize human resources. During that time, social mobility heavily relied on administrative oversight and allocation, with abilities perceived as relatively fixed traits. These features reflect and resemble the lack of control and the role of chance prevalent in nepotism and aristocracy, demonstrating that disregarding chance is not an essential requirement for defining a meritocratic system based on merit alone. However, it is not my intention to suggest a return to this initial state of meritocracy, with extensive administrative oversight and little consideration for personal development of competencies.

There is a second point that I subscribe to, as proposed by Sandel in his work. It involves the possibility of establishing sorting mechanisms in a meritocratic system deliberately incorporating an element of chance in evaluating individuals, such as the example he provided for university admissions procedures. There is potential to create a

meritocratic system that nudges individuals to recognize the role of luck in determining their status. This does not entail denying the illusory nature of meritocratic systems, nor does it mean discarding the meritocratic project entirely, as it has brought certain benefits. Rather, it involves acknowledging and embracing the notion that meritocracy *is* an illusion – perceiving and regarding it as such. It entails redefining meritocracy as a system that is inherently *unjustly* unequal, which automatically raises questions about what is and is not just. It requires accepting that the world is unjust, that people experience harm, unfair treatment, and even perish unjustly. It is unjust because individuals say, "I did not deserve this." But what does it truly mean to deserve something? It involves notions of entitlement and appropriation.

Playing the Game

I believe there is value in a system that strives for equality of opportunity. It provides individuals with the chance to develop competencies and, as a result, maximizes human resources that benefit the well-being of the community. However, it is important to remember our vulnerabilities. To achieve this, we must not only strive to implement policies and mechanisms that intentionally rely on luck and are transparent about it, but also nurture a personal attitude that acknowledges the role of chance in life.

Implementing mechanisms that emphasize chance may seem like a complex task, but it is not impossible. The complexity arises because our bureaucratic structures are built in a way that attempts to convey accomplishments and rewards as solely attributed to personal merit. They strive to maintain the facade of meritocracy being justly unequal rather than acknowledging it as an illusion. Political rhetoric across the spectrum benefits from and relies on this belief in the meritocratic ideal. Therefore, it is crucial to first embrace the illusory nature of meritocracy within the public sphere. This collective acceptance is likely to foster more open deliberation on how to reshape structures to reflect the role of luck in life and

gradually bring about change. The question now is how we can collectively accept, peacefully, that meritocracy is an illusion.

Another problem lies in our belief that we can completely rid ourselves of vulnerability, despite existing in a reality where everything is interconnected. This prompts us to reflect on the Western notion of individuality, as it has led us to believe that individuals can be self-sustaining or exist in a state of self-sufficiency. This connects with the concept of the 'self-made man,' which suggests that the self can be constructed and shaped to achieve success and embody ideal characteristics, both material (e.g., wealth) and non-material (e.g., titles, personal traits).

The bottom line is that people can strive to climb the social ladder, fight for equality of opportunity, better working conditions, and various other aspects. Many elements of the meritocratic project are worth pursuing. However, the key notion is simple: to remember that ultimately, everything is beyond our control. This is the notion put forward by the element of *anicca*, namely that everything that One might argue that such an attitude could lead to questioning the purpose of striving for anything at all and foster complacency. However, that is not the case. The point is to cultivate an attitude (composure) where individuals can set goals for themselves but do not tie their well-being solely to the realization of those goals. It is about playing the game of life while fully aware that it is just a game. Games are meant to be enjoyable, and life is an experience filled with joy. There is no need, and arguably no reason, to stop playing once one realizes it is a game. In fact, the awareness that life is a game can make it even more enjoyable (or less intimidating), especially during times of loss, as the consequences have no real essence to them. There is joy in personal development and a sense of connection in working to leave the world a better place than we found it.

Conclusion

This paper started by briefly introducing friendliness (*mettā*) and the specific philosophical concepts that were found most relevant to engage with meritocracy, which were derived from Andrea Sangiacomo's *An Introduction to Friendliness (mettā): Emotional Intelligence and Freedom in the Pāli Discourses of the Buddha (2022)*. Thereafter, an analysis of meritocracy was provided, focusing on its history, political relevance, and key principles. This analysis particularly emphasized how the definition of merit had changed and what its implications were. The two following sections laid out the arguments for the superiority and shortcomings of meritocracy. The former was mostly derived from the reading of Adrian Wooldridge's *The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World (2021)*, which emphasized the financial and moral values of upholding the meritocratic ideal. The latter was informed by an analysis of Michael Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit (2020)*, which attributed the contemporary societal and political divisions in Western nations to meritocracy. Finally, a philosophical reflection was engaged in, exploring how concepts from the practice of *mettā*, namely impermanence (*anicca*), no-self (*anattā*), and vulnerability, provided a relevant perspective for addressing meritocracy's promotion of perceived control. *Anicca* contends that impermanence is structurally encoded in all phenomena, meaning everything that originates must cease. When applied to a reflection to the self, *anicca* manifest itself as the inherent vulnerability of being a human, death. As such, all phenomena are fundamentally impossible to appropriate, which means there is no possibility for full control over one's circumstances. It thus become clear why the meritocratic emphasis on effort is problematic: it creates the illusion of control which a virtually unobtainable condition.

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