

## The 1%

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Alpha Chapter of California Initiation Address  
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New Fellow Members; family and friends: a very warm welcome to you all.

I wish to congratulate the newly initiated, most heartily, on your accomplishment. You have reason to be proud of your membership in Phi Beta Kappa, and in particular in the chapter of the Alpha of California. (As the President has just mentioned, the Berkeley chapter is the Alpha of California; some of you may take particular pleasure in knowing that the Stanford chapter is the *Beta* of California.) Behind your induction into Phi Beta Kappa is a story of your commitment to study and sustained effort in the face of both setbacks and temptations. Yet behind *that* story is another story: the story of what your *families* have done to bring you to this moment. We are here to honor you students; but in doing so we also honor your families. And although families deserve honor hereby, they are in turn not the only ones: so too you are called upon to acknowledge the debts you owe to friends, to fellow students, to Graduate Student Instructors and professors and dedicated administrators, to the taxpayers of California, and to many, many others who have made your accomplishments possible.

But, having met some human beings (and being human beings ourselves), we know how this tends to work: we understandably focus on what *we* have done to put ourselves here, and maybe acknowledge, but too rarely properly *emphasize*, what *others* have done to make it possible. So it is that those who apply to the most competitive universities think they will be so lucky if they are accepted; and then, once here, generally and properly come to believe that they deserve their places. So too those applying for a well-compensated position or beginning a start-up think of how fortunate they would be to succeed; but then those who do succeed come to believe that they deserve what they make—it is called what you *earn* for a reason. I do not now wish to question that desert, but only to call attention to a human tendency to have a somewhat undeveloped sense of how that desert is *shared*.

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10% of U.S. colleges and universities have Phi Beta Kappa chapters. Each of these chapters can select at most 10% of their arts and sciences graduates for membership. Setting aside important statistical caveats, that means *you* are a kind of 1%. It will not be lost on you that “the 1%”—understood in economic terms—has been a vilified population recently, even as they have ever greater power to match their ever greater wealth.

But surely this 1% and that 1% are altogether different—aren't they? Well, we should think about that. Can *this* sort of elite be justified? Is distinguishing some small number for honor a legitimate exercise? Phi Beta Kappa is by its nature exclusive. We must indeed recognize that one motivating reason that many wish to join—is that only few can join. But how can we regard this *exclusivity* as legitimate? Recall that for years you have been hearing from this exclusive institution a steady insistence on the core value of *inclusion*. How are we—how are you—to square the value of inclusion with your membership of such exclusive societies?

(It cuts against my pedagogical instincts—and may even be in some tension with a profession of inclusivity—to provide you with my draft answer. In my classes, this is where you would do your part, offering some kind of reply that would then set our direction going forward. This isn't only because people tend not to be able to properly listen to lectures or sermons. It's also because you are then active in the inquiry, and especially because the answer is often much better than what any *one* of us may say on the subject. But on this occasion I have been asked to speak rather than prod others to speak.)

So let me start with the standard educated answer to this conundrum. Namely: Those elites are *illegitimate* that are based on accidents of birth, that privilege those who happened to be born into certain races, religions, or families. But elites of *merit* are altogether different and legitimate, as they reward excellence rather than wealth or whiteness, say, and recognize hard work rather than inheritance.

Okay. Allow me to raise just three questions about this standard answer.

First, notice that those who defend what we have called *illegitimate* privilege do not argue that their accidental characteristics should be rewarded as a matter of arbitrary luck. Even racists, classists, ethno-nationalists, and their ilk make a claim of *merit*. So we must *argue* our conception of worth against *rival conceptions of worth*—a more substantial task than simply taking the side of merit versus mere accident.

Second, as you have learned, even paradigm cases of merit tend to harbor advantages of birth. So academic attainment is not *uncorrelated* with certain kinds of economic background, family education, race, physical or medical condition, and on and on. It may be right to reward merit, but to excavate it requires exceptional probity, and instruments that are more finely tuned than those usually used.

Third, what does it *mean* to be recognized for excellence, or for that matter to excel? “Be best” is a hollow slogan. Not least, our philosophers struggle to articulate what it even means to be *good*, which may seem a necessary preliminary step if we are going to strive for the superlative form. It is in reply to the classic question of Santa Claus that even the wily preschooler may reply: “Define ‘Good.’”

It may seem impossible, however, or at least unAmerican, to question the *ideal* of meritocracy, which these days may look tantamount to an attack on Mom and apple pie. In fact, however, this is new.

“Meritocracy” may sound like an ancient Greek idea, but it is half Latin, and isn’t a classical term at all; the word was only invented in the 1950s, *as a term of abuse*. It is sometimes remarked that the English term “meritocracy” was coined by Michael Young, in his unusual 1958 book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Strikingly, the first sentence in which the word occurs in that book sets out an opposition between meritocracy and democracy, with what I assure you is a sardonic remark: “Today we frankly recognize that democracy can be no more than aspiration, and have rule not so much by the people as by the cleverest people; ... a true meritocracy of talent.”<sup>1</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, however, the honors for the coinage go to another sociologist, Alan Fox, who wrote in the May 1956 issue of *Socialist Commentary*, the monthly journal of the Socialist Vanguard Group, thus: “The ‘meritocracy’; the society in which the gifted, the smart, the energetic, the ambitious and the ruthless are carefully sifted out and helped towards their destined positions of dominance.” Also in 1958, Hannah Arendt clearly sets out a direct opposition between democracy and meritocracy, or, as she writes, “once more the establishment of an oligarchy, this time not of wealth or of birth but of talent....It contradicts the principle of equality, of equalitarian democracy.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994 [1958]), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” *Partisan Review* 25:4 (1958), pp. 493–512, at 499 (also published as the pamphlet *Die Krise in der Erziehung* (Bremen: Angelsachsen Verlag, 1958)). It is only on revising that she invoked the word: in the version printed in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (NY: Penguin, 1977), pp. 173-196 (at 177; and cf. 176) she wrote: “Meritocracy contradicts the principle of equality, of an equalitarian democracy, no less than any other oligarchy.”

This is an extraordinary beginning for meritocracy, or at least for the word, which is at the outset used to diagnose a socio-historical phenomenon *opposed to* democracy, and is thus arraigned as inimical to it. In the intervening decades, ‘meritocracy’ underwent a charmed transformation, becoming a label of a good and even wholesome political principle, to the extent that it has struck many as an obvious truth: *of course* those who are best fit to run things should run things. Who could be so perverse as to deny it? In some parts of the world, these decades after the mid-1950s were also decades of a spreading confidence in the goodness of democracy, and even of its triumph. But if even at the beginning of *this* decade the thought that “we are all democrats now” could seem a perfectly natural one, the picture looks very different here at the decade's end.<sup>3</sup> We are again confronted with an opposition between democracy and meritocracy, but at a time when democracy's stock has fallen with the rise of outrageous populists, and ear is given again to advocates of meritocracy *over* democracy.

It is worth wondering why the neologism has had such a successful career, given that it was born wishing not to be born, and as a second best, to die soon. One reason is the seeming obviousness of the conception, the kind of truistic power in insisting that those who should rule are those who should rule, that the power of decision must be assigned to those who merit it. I believe that another reason that the term became standard is that it neatly *rebranded* an idea that no longer dared speak its name. I am referring to the idea—which by the later twentieth century had been widely discredited in the West as a model of government—of *aristocracy*.<sup>4</sup> Yet meritocracy is aristocracy for Protestants. Michael Young notes that merit is capacity or IQ “...plus effort.” This Protestant ethic marks off the notion as distinct from the aristocratic ideal of *sprezzatura*, or, “tranquil consciousness of effortless superiority,” in the words of Asquith's description of the Balliol man.

But of course the “effort” addition to the equation isn't strictly *necessary* for excellence (though it may be necessary for its appeal): it may be a normal or usual requirement for merit, but it also happens to make the idea easier to swallow, because it is more acceptable to recognize merit on the basis of work and not just ability or accomplishment with or without work. Preferring those who are supposedly “effortlessly superior” sounds *anti-democratic*, while preferring those who are superior through effort sounds in principle consistent with a democratic outlook, or at least one that understands people as in some important sense equal.

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<sup>3</sup> See Wendy Brown's brief but trenchant “We Are All Democrats Now...,” *Theory & Event* 13:2 (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle says that aristocracy is that politeia “in which offices are awarded in accord with virtue and in accord with merit [or worth, *axia*]” (καὶ ἐν ἣ κατ' ἀρετὴν αἱ τιμαὶ δίδονται καὶ κατ' ἀξίαν: *Politics* III.5, 1278a19-20).

Mention of Balliol College, Oxford brings us back to an earlier time, a century earlier when the system that Arendt, Fox, and Young criticized was being set up. Michael Young starts his work by saying that the modern era began when “Merit became the arbiter, [and] attainment the standard, for entry and advancement”—first in government, and then in education.<sup>5</sup> He frames his analysis with reference to the reform of the British Civil Service, and thus of the Indian Civil Service, in the wake of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report.

The co-sponsor of that report, Charles Trevelyan, wrote in 1853 that the civil service reform would ensure a force of “the sons of gentlemen, or those who by force of cultivation, good training, and good society have acquired the feeling and habits of gentlemen. The tendency of the measure will . . . be decidedly *aristocratic*, but it will be so in a good sense.” “Aristocracy in a good sense” still didn’t sound as good as meritocracy, however, and so reference to “government by the best” gave way to defenses of “government by merit.” So George Charles Brodrick provided a justificatory account of the civil service reforms in his 1858 book *Promotion by Merit, in Relation to Government and Education*. The rise of social Darwinism in the later nineteenth century made this sort of thinking seem especially natural, as meritocracy was a kind of government of the fittest, as scientifically determined. So Hugh Taylor, in his 1915 *Government by Natural Selection* makes clear that “government by merit”, while necessarily a kind of unequal government, is nonetheless a kind of “free government,” for “a free career is opened to political talent” (p. 87). The success of the civil service model impressed many on these shores, and so in America we see social scientific analyses and proposals in its wake, like Lucius Wilmerding’s 1935 treatise, *Government By Merit*.

Thus, although meritocracy as a word didn’t emerge until around 1956, the idea of “government by merit” was widespread during the previous century. And it is worth underlining that the roots of this idea are intertwined with the Indian civil service in the Raj, with Social Darwinism, and with a notion of epistocracy or rule by the more knowledgeable.

The very idea of meritocracy has a kind of inexorable conceptual smoothness to it: as a matter of definition, those who merit something should get what they merit; and therefore those who merit rule should rule. But we can glimpse here what is so offensive about the *meritocratic* ideal: the conception that those with some kind of merit should have *kratos* or power over others. If recognition of merit is done with all due attention to the hazards of such an exercise, and if it is done to help those recognized to serve rather than to rule, then *perhaps* we are okay. But this will require much further honesty, effort, and vigilance.

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<sup>5</sup> Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, p. 9.

Just as the economic 1% has exceptional obligations, so too you in the top 1% of educational attainment have your own obligations. You will have to find your own way in articulating those obligations for yourself. Although it may sound like the punchline of a sarcastic takedown of the idea, I would urge you to be part of and to constitute “the *best kind* of elite.” And Phi Beta Kappa and UC Berkeley themselves can provide good examples of what I mean.

Phi Beta Kappa faces strong headwinds in its mission to support the liberal arts and sciences, not least from persistent forces of anti-intellectualism. We must place the responsibility for this squarely on those who whip up anti-intellectual sentiment, often as a cynical ploy to get ahead *via* a kind of anti-elitist rhetoric. But we must also consider the responsibility of intellectuals, both those who are well placed to defend and sustain intellectual and cultural values and activities and do little or nothing on behalf of the muses; or those who are academics and the like, who too often strike a pose or make a political claim that is transmitted as a signal to like-minded others, without attention to the meaning of that signal in the wider world. This risks backlash, dismissal, contempt, and division. Phi Beta Kappa's own unifying strategies in this regard are admirable, working as they do to deepen culture while bringing judicious political pressure to bear.

This university, in turn, provides an especially inspiring lesson in squaring a commitment to excellence with a commitment to public service. You have been here long enough to know that it is not perfect. But it is progressive in the best sense: although they won't generally have it easy, Berkeley ensures that many will have chances in life that they simply would not have had. Elite institutions like Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford really are different. While seriously great on some dimensions, they are in the aggregate socially regressive institutions that help those with wealth and power to retain that wealth and power within their families and groups. Berkeley is committed to a better and higher vision.

You scholarly one-percenters must define your own obligations; but I hope that as scholars you will take on life-long commitments to truth rather than easy answers, to thinking through the subtleties and the consequences, to deepening yourself and the culture around you.

The aspirational language of *governing* has generally been replaced by the language of *bettering* the world, even if the ambition is sometimes all too similar. I would have you consider an aspiration to *transcend* the world around you. In the most famous Phi Beta Kappa speech, the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1837 addressed the

assembled initiates about the *duties* of the American scholar, if in a more vatic language than is now usual. In closing, I will quote part of his understanding:

“The world of any moment is the merest appearance.

Some great decorum, some fetish of a government, some ephemeral trade, or war, or man, is cried up by half mankind and cried down by the other half, as if all depended on this particular up or down.

The odds are that the whole question is not worth the poorest thought which the scholar has lost in listening to the controversy.

Let him not quit his belief that a popgun is a popgun, though the ancient and honorable of the earth affirm it to be the crack of doom.

In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let him hold by himself; add observation to observation, patient of neglect, patient of reproach; and bide his own time, happy enough, if he can satisfy himself alone, that this day he has seen something truly.

...

Free should the scholar be, free and brave.”

There is much-needed emphasis at Berkeley on action. But action without full thought is hardly necessarily good. So may you continue to be scholars, to strive to see truly, to be free and brave in your thinking.

Congratulations to you all, and fare well.