

“On meritocracy and equality”

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Daniel Bell takes a liberal stance in tackling the populist cry for equality and its objections to meritocracy. The main issue is that of meritocracy versus equality. There are two crucially different types of equality that must be considered: that of opportunity and that of result. Meritocracy is compatible with equal opportunity, but inevitably leads to unequal result. Therefore, Bell’s question for the populists is whether they want genuine equal opportunity or equal result. In the past, equal opportunity was desirable. However, the replacement of value of thought by that of sentiment, coupled with the realization that equal environments do not necessarily produce equal income, wealth or status led to the demand for a society that provided equal results. Bell believes that the populist objections to meritocracy—inherited intelligence, inherited social connections, the random influence of luck, too much competition and inequality through equal opportunity—both contradict each other and overlap. Bell claims that if equal result is to be the driving force that forms social policy, there must be sound ethical justification. He acknowledges that there has been an effort to establish a philosophical argument for a communal society (as opposed to one that favors individuals), namely the idea of justice as fairness. Bell examines Rousseau, Mill and Rawls’s defenses of equal result, and decides that group rights contradictable individual rights, which are the fundamental tenet of traditional liberalism. Therefore, he claims that their arguments are inadequate. In the end, Bell rejects the call for equality of result, claiming that inequality is both inevitable and acceptable. He reduces the entire populist argument to status envy and quickly dismisses it. He acknowledges that everyone deserves respect and in a true meritocracy,

they have the right to that respect. However, the ones who rise to the top in a true meritocracy must have done so through competence and therefore deserve their superior status. Bell concludes that meritocracy is the best way to run a society, and that any inequalities that result are fair.

Bell believes that the issue is between meritocracy and equality because the populists decry the socioeconomic exclusion that results in a meritocracy. They demand greater equality as a defense against such exclusion. Bell's question for populists, then, is whether they want a more genuine equality of opportunity, or an equality of result. The new post-industrial society is creating a "technical elite" (31). A liberal theory of equality defines a society where equal opportunity brings the intelligent to the top to make best use of their talents. However, the populists claim that meritocracy is simply a new version of the old unfair society, where birth determined a fixed social hierarchy (64). In the past, equality of opportunity (theoretically provided in a perfect meritocracy) was satisfactory because in an industrial society, hard work and effort was what allowed social mobility. The resulting inequalities were deemed acceptable. However, in today's post-industrial society, talent has replaced simple effort. This new mode of access to social privilege, say the populists, is exclusionary because technical skill obtained through higher education is heavily influenced by inheritance and social background (34). Therefore, equal opportunity does not satisfactorily solve the problem of fixed social rank based on inheritance. Bell says that now, equal result is what they want, in the form of open admissions to education, quotas and minority representation (34-38).

Bell explains the shift of emphasis from equal opportunity to equal result in two parts: the replacement of thought by sentiment as a chief value, and the Coleman report. During America's earliest years, thought was prized, and because some are superior in thought to others, society settled into a natural "hierarchy of intellect" (39). Tocqueville

observed that, eventually, “thought” was replaced by “sentiment,” and the idea that “no man was better than anyone else” (40) prevailed. 19th century America’s concept of equality rejected the snobbery of aristocracy. This is where the departure from classic liberalism began. Classic liberalism emphasizes the individual and says that society must be arranged to allow the individual the freedom to live a good life in the way that he chooses. Differences in capability, endowments and values are assumed; whatever happens in a fairly regulated society, despite any ensuing inequalities, is fair by definition. However, with the entrance of sentiment as the new prized value, the old system, which valued and rewarded thought, was declared unacceptable; the new demand was for equality of result—income, status and power—for all. When sentiment became the most important value, any sort of hierarchy became undesirable. Part two of Bell’s explanation involves the Coleman report of ’66. Professor James Coleman of Johns Hopkins University carried out a study to find the relation between differences in resources available to white and black children to the disparity in their achievement. After a survey involving 4,000 schools and 600,000 students, Coleman found that despite comparability of black and white schools in terms of resources, there was a significant achievement gap between black and white children. He reported that the economic and educational status of the parents accounted for more variation in achievement than did school differences. The study assumed that the job of social policy was to equalize resources. However, Coleman studied achievement, or the results of these resources. The effect was that he shifted the focus from equal inputs to equal outcomes. The advent of sentiment, followed by the realization that equalizing opportunities did not equalize results, shifted demand from equal opportunities to equal results.

Any political demand that attempts to drive social policy, asserts Bell, must have a sound ethical justification (47). Bell claims that morality shapes history: Western liberal

society has upheld the value of individual freedom and the fulfillment of one's own aspirations. However, traditional liberalism is giving way to the rise of socialism and the focus on communal ends. Bell alleges that, historically, socialism's appeal came not from its normative implications, but from a resentment of existing material disparities (48). Socialism focused more on the problems of current society than on the promise of a better future. However, Bell acknowledges that now, in order to earn legitimacy, proponents of equal result are attempting philosophical justification by proposing a theory that a just society is one that is fair.

Bell evaluates the arguments of the three philosophers who have provided such theories to justify the normative claim for equality of result: Rousseau, Mill and Rawls—and rejects each argument under traditional liberalism. Rousseau calls for the renouncement of the self for community, declaring equality as a means of achieving civic virtue. “The price of equality, then, is that ‘an individual can no longer claim anything’; he has no individual rights” (50). Bell rejects this definition of equality because it contradicts the fundamental liberal protection of individual rights. Mill decries democracy as breeding competition and envy; he asserts that minority group representation by using quotas is necessary to achieve social peace. Bell dismisses this argument because of the practical difficulty of defining the context of a minority. “How does one define a legitimate ‘interest,’ or social unit, or minority corporate group?” (52). He also cites the issues of polarization and fragmentation. Inclusive minority representation often results in violent conflict among classes, religions, etc. And too often, multiple identities cause divisions that render representative groups useless. For example, “Catholic and Protestant workers divide so that neither religion nor class wholly captures a single allegiance” (53). Rawls' defense most directly defines “justice as fairness” as equality of result. He defines justice as the “appropriate division of social advantages”

(54). Rawls begins with the traditional liberal position that individuals have an equal right to liberties of citizenship. However, he goes on to introduce his difference principle: that any inequality of distribution must benefit the least well off. Liberalism accepts an equal start, but justifies unequal result due to differential natural talent. Rawls claims that natural advantages are as arbitrary as social ones (55). Since natural advantages cannot be eliminated, he concludes, the solution is to equalize result. Bell credits Rawls for giving the most thorough defense of socialism. However, he sees in this theory the demise of traditional liberalism because once again, group rights are favored over individual rights.

The question then becomes: Is the principle of fairness (defined as equality of result) wrong? Bell acknowledges the difficulty of evaluating a situation in which the conflict is between “right vs. right” (59). However, there are undeniable problems with equality of result. A practical problem is that it contradicts the notion of universalism—the notion that a rule should be applied equally to all (61). Bell values universalism because it allows administration to avoid having to judge individuals. Rawls claims that fairness is a social norm because individuals making rational choices would tend toward fairness. However, Bell cites the Arrow impossibility theorem in arguing that a group rational choice is possible. He also cites the failure of socialism in the Soviet Union, which abandoned equality of result because it found that a system of differential results served as an incentive and was more efficient. Bell also noted an interesting phenomenon called the “Tocqueville effect;” as technology decreased the disparity among people, rising expectations led to increasing resentment, or status envy. In the end, Bell reduces all arguments to the issue of status envy.

First, he asserts that inequality is not a valid claim against meritocracy. Assuming the inevitability of inequality, he questions what kinds of inequalities lead to what kinds of differences, claiming that some should be legitimate concerns of civilized society

while others are not. Bell acknowledges the right of basic social equality—or the rights to respect, security and dignity. However, he claims that relentless pursuit of equality can defeat its own purpose in certain areas where it can conflict with other social prerogatives (65). For example, the differential prices of a doctor to that of a nurse ensure efficient rationing of time by allowing smaller matters to be handled by the cheaper nurse and more important matters to be handled by the more expensive doctor. Then, Bell turns and completely dismisses the relevance of inequality concerning the issue of meritocracy. It is unclear whether *he* thinks inequality is irrelevant or whether he's claiming that inequality is not the primary concern of populism. I believe there is more evidence for the latter position.

Rejecting inequality as a valid charge against meritocracy, Bell's following claim is that the populists are simply having an envious gut reaction to the higher status of the most competent few with no regard for justice (66). He claims that populists resent the superior competence of the few and want instead complete democratization, where a community council, for example, can determine the actions of a skilled doctor (65). Bell completely ridicules the populist movement for disguising selfish motives as cries for equality. However, he agrees to play their game and examines status envy, defining it as the right to respect for all versus praise for the worthy (66).

Bell reduces the issue of fairness into a simple question of respect versus praise by relating status to wealth and power. He claims that there are three realms of hierarchy in every society: wealth, power and status. In the past, one could buy the other two. For example, in a military society, power could exact wealth and status (67). However, in today's society, the correlations no longer hold. Wealth does not necessarily result in recognition (status), political rank (power) does not result in wealth and high status does not result in power or wealth. Bell cites an example: professors are among the highest in

prestige rankings, yet do not necessarily hold power or wealth (67). Bell adds that social policy also evens out disparities within the realms through social minimums for income and political checks on unilateral power. Bell's key claim is that status is the most difficult to resolve, and therefore the most significant, disparity. His justification is Rousseau's observation that status envy instigates all competition, rivalries, successes and catastrophes. However, Bell maintains that a society would be just to the extent that there can be equality of respect for all and differential praise for the worthy few.

Therefore Bell concludes that meritocracy is a fair way to produce a productive and cultivated society. The institutions of the university, business and government all benefit from a system where the most competent rise to the top and expand scholarship and learning, economic productivity and political leadership. Inequality of result is acceptable and the distinction of superiority is even desirable, as long as the meritocratic elite consists of those who have earned it. Bell also claims that one can prioritize the disadvantaged in forming social policy while allowing the competent to work their way to the top (67). There is no need to level off the top in order to raise the bottom. A meritocracy is only unjust when the distinction between the top and the rest is demeaning. However, Bell claims that a just meritocracy in which all receive due respect while the worthy few receive due praise is possible and fair.

Bell examines the rise of socialism against liberalism and dismisses the populist arguments for equality of result on the grounds that they are illiberal, self-contradictory, irrelevant and shallow and that their objections to meritocracy are unfounded. He concludes that meritocracy really is the most efficient way to run a society, and fair to boot.