This is an exhilarating vision of human agency, and it goes hand in hand with a morally comforting conclusion: We get what we deserve. If my success is my own doing, something I've earned through talent and hard work, I can take pride in it, confident that I deserve the rewards my achievements bring. A meritocratic society, then, is doubly inspiring: it affirms a powerful notion of freedom, and it gives people what they have earned for themselves and therefore deserve.

Inspiring though it is, the principle of merit can take a tyrannical turn, not only when societies fail to live up to it, but also—indeed especially—when they do. The dark side of the meritocratic ideal is embedded in its most alluring promise, the promise of mastery and self-making. This promise comes with a burden that is difficult to bear. The meritocratic ideal places great weight on the notion of personal responsibility. Holding people responsible for what they do is a good thing, up to a point. It respects their capacity to think and act for themselves, as moral agents and as citizens. But it is one thing to hold people responsible for acting morally; it is something else to assume that we are, each of us, wholly responsible for our lot in life.

Even the phrase "our lot in life" draws on a moral vocabulary that suggests certain limits to unbridled responsibility. To speak of one's "lot" suggests the drawing of lots, a result determined by fate, fortune, or divine providence, not our own effort.[1] It points beyond merit and choice to the realm of luck and chance, or on some accounts, grace. This reminds us that the most consequential early debates about merit were not about income and jobs but about God's favor: Is it something we earn or receive as a gift?