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# Meritocracy Under Siege: From Ancient Virtue to Modern Victimhood

## Ancient Foundations of Merit and Excellence

Throughout history, cultures around the world have wrestled with balancing **excellence** and **humility**. The notion that **merit** – ability, virtue, and hard work – should earn respect or authority is ancient. Confucian philosophy in China (551–479 BC) taught that government should be led by the most virtuous and talented, not by those of noble blood. This idea gave rise to the famous **Imperial examination** system in the Sui Dynasty (6th century AD), which aimed to select officials based on merit rather than aristocratic lineage. As Confucian scholar Mencius argued over two millennia ago, true justice cannot mean treating the excellent and the mediocre the same: "That things are unequal is a matter of fact… If a roughly finished shoe sells at the same price as a finely finished one, who would make the latter?". In other words, *rewarding merit creates incentives for quality and virtue*, whereas artificially enforcing equality in outcomes only produces confusion and mediocrity.

In the West, the seeds of meritocratic thinking also appeared early. **Ancient Greek** ideals celebrated *areté* (virtue or excellence) in both mind and body. **Plato** (c. 4th century BC) argued that the "ship of state" should be steered by philosopher-kings – the wisest and most capable – rather than by the uninformed masses. **Aristotle** similarly contended that justice means treating people *according to their merits*, giving "unequals" unequal rewards in proportion to their virtue or contribution. Meanwhile, cultural myths warned against excessive *hubris* (arrogance). The ancient Greeks believed that **hubris** – overweening pride – was inevitably punished by the gods, a moral lesson dramatized in countless tragedies. Likewise, the Hebrew proverb "pride goes before a fall" became a timeless warning. Such maxims taught humility, but notably *they did not glorify weakness* – they cautioned the strong against vanity, without suggesting that being *unsuccessful or weak was itself virtuous*.

Other traditional cultures echoed these themes. In many Indigenous and folk traditions, boasting and arrogance were frowned upon, and community well-being was valued over individual vanity. Yet even there, the **virtues of courage, skill, and honor were respected**. For example, in some Australian Aboriginal sayings and East Asian proverbs, one finds the idea that "the **tallest tree** catches the most wind" or "the **nail that sticks out** gets hammered down" – a recognition that standing *far* above others can invite envy or retribution. However, these cautions against standing out were meant to preserve social harmony and modesty; they were *not* endorsements of mediocrity. In summary, ancient wisdom across civilizations extolled **genuine merit – skill, wisdom, virtue – as worthy of honor**, while urging the meritorious to remain humble. Nowhere in classical thought was *weakness* itself held up as a virtue; rather, it was often associated with pity or low status, not moral superiority.

## The Rise of Meritocracy in the West: From Virtue to Talent

Meritocracy as a formal principle took stronger shape in the **Western world** with the decline of hereditary privilege. The **Enlightenment** and age of revolutions brought the radical idea that birth should not dictate

one's station – instead, talent and effort should. The French Revolution enshrined this in the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, which declared all citizens "equally eligible to all dignities, public positions and occupations, according to their ability, and without distinction except that of their virtues and talents". In practice, **Napoleon Bonaparte** adopted the slogan *"la carrière ouverte aux talents"* ("careers open to talents"), attempting to root out the old aristocratic patronage in favor of promoting individuals on merit. Across the Atlantic, **Thomas Jefferson** envisioned America as a "natural aristocracy" of the talented and virtuous, considering this system nature's "most precious gift" for the governance of society. The ideal that came to be known as the **American Dream** captured this meritocratic ethos: *each person* should have the chance to rise "to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position". In short, 19th- and 20th-century Western societies increasingly embraced **equality of opportunity** – everyone should start the race of life on roughly equal footing – while accepting that *inequality of outcomes* (hierarchies of achievement) would result from different talents and efforts.

By the mid-20th century, **meritocracy** had become an accepted ideal in principle (if not always in practice). Ironically, the very term **"meritocracy"** was coined as a pejorative: British sociologist Michael Young's satirical 1958 book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* imagined a dystopian future where society was stratified purely by IQ and effort. Young warned that an exam-based elite could become arrogant and oppressive, looking down upon the less successful as deservedly inferior. Yet despite this cautionary tale, the concept of meritocracy gained *positive* connotations in public discourse. It came to stand for a *fair system*: one where success correlates with ability and work rather than with nepotism, inherited wealth, or arbitrary factors. Governments and institutions implemented civil service exams, *academic merit* scholarships, and corporate merit-based promotions to try to realize this ideal.

Of course, the real world never fully matched the meritocratic ideal – *privilege* and prejudice continued to play roles in outcomes. Late 20th-century critics pointed out that often **"merit" itself could be shaped by social advantages** (better schools, family connections, etc.), calling meritocracy a "political ideology and an illusion" that legitimizes inequality. For example, economist Thomas Piketty observed that societies growing more unequal like to justify the gap by invoking merit, even when inherited wealth or luck are major factors. Philosophers such as John Rawls and Michael Sandel challenged whether a person's natural talents are truly their own "merit" – or just a lottery of birth that doesn't morally entitle them to more rewards. These debates raised important questions about **fairness**. Nonetheless, even most meritocracy critics did *not* suggest rewarding *lack* of merit; rather, they argued for leveling the playing field or tempering extreme inequalities of outcome. The basic premise that *hard work and talent should be rewarded* remained broadly uncontested. That premise, however, is now being eroded by a different cultural force – one that doesn't just critique meritocracy's imperfections, but outright **denigrates merit and achievement** in the name of "fairness."

## The Modern Erosion: Virtue Signaling and the Veneration of Victimhood

In recent years, a profound shift in cultural values has begun to **undermine the ethos of meritocracy** in a new way. This shift can be summarized as a move from *celebrating achievement* to *sanctifying victimhood* – coupled with a tendency to performative or insincere virtue in lieu of real excellence. Three interrelated phenomena characterize this erosion: **virtue signaling**, **grievance politics (competitive victimhood)**, and an ideological fetish for leveling that effectively **pathologizes success**. Together, these trends amount to

what one scholar called a “large-scale moral change” – a *“victimhood culture”* replacing older honor and dignity cultures.

## Virtue Signaling vs. Genuine Virtue

One hallmark of the new culture is **virtue signaling** – the ostentatious display of right-on opinions or values, mainly to burnish one’s own moral image. Unlike genuine virtue (which involves difficult actions or personal sacrifice), *virtue signaling is largely performative*. It is defined as “the act or practice of conspicuously displaying one’s awareness of and attentiveness to political or social issues, *especially instead of taking effective action*”. In the age of social media, it has become effortless to signal support for fashionable causes with a hashtag or slogan, *garnering social praise at no cost*. The term **“virtue signaling”** gained popularity around 2015 (first attributed to journalist James Bartholomew) as a critique of people who loudly broadcast their moral righteousness without substantively living up to it. We see examples everywhere: from corporate PR departments issuing hollow statements to individuals aggressively expressing outrage online to prove their purity.

This trend erodes meritocracy subtly, by **shifting the basis of social rewards** from *actual achievement or character* to *surface-level piety*. In a merit-based ethic, one gains esteem by doing something valuable – excelling at work, creating art, helping others in tangible ways. In a virtue-signaling culture, one gains esteem simply by *saying* the “right” things, professing the approved values, regardless of any real contribution. The result is a kind of **moral meritocracy inversion**: social status accrues to those most adept at public moral posturing. For example, a company might hire or promote individuals *more for optics* – to signal commitment to diversity or activism – than for competence, if it feels pressure to demonstrate ideological credentials. Likewise, in intellectual circles, the merit of rigorous debate or innovation can be devalued; instead, parroting the “correct” ideological stance yields applause (even if it requires little thought or courage). As commentator Nick Dalgarno quipped, we live in an age of “glib soundbites from glibber politicians” offering virtue signals in place of solving complex problems. When moral **appearance** trumps **substance**, the concept of earning one’s status through real merit fades into the background.

## Grievance Politics and the Sanctification of Victimhood

Hand-in-hand with virtue signaling comes the rise of **grievance politics** and what sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning term the **“victimhood culture.”** This is a cultural milieu in which being seen as a *victim* of injustice confers not just sympathy but **elevated moral status**. In earlier societies, moral hierarchies were quite different: under **honor cultures**, for instance, *victims had a low status*, as being harmed without fighting back was seen as shameful. Even the subsequent **dignity culture** of the 20th century – which emphasized individual worth and rights – taught children to endure insults with stoic resilience (“sticks and stones may break my bones…”) and encouraged direct, non-escalating responses to conflict rather than public melodrama.

Today’s emergent culture flips these scripts. Now, **publicizing one’s grievances and injuries** – even minor or unintentional slights – is a common way to gain attention and moral credit. Campbell and Manning observe that calling out small “microaggressions” serves to *“raise the moral status of the victims”* while lowering the status of the alleged offenders. In a literal sense, **victimhood has become a form of social currency**. People compete in what has been dubbed “competitive victimhood,” wherein even relatively privileged individuals strive to portray themselves as *oppressed* or *wounded* in some way. By claiming victim status, one can deflect criticism and claim the moral high ground, since victims are now viewed as

inherently virtuous or morally **authentic**. As one analysis put it, this dynamic "incentivizes even privileged people to claim that they are victims".

The elevation of victimhood profoundly undermines meritocratic values. **Achievement** and **excellence** often require resilience – a willingness to overcome obstacles without self-pity. But in a grievance-focused milieu, stoic resilience wins less admiration than *openly nursing one's wounds*. Psychologically, if people learn that being a **loser** or **sufferer** garners more praise than being a **winner**, it should not surprise us if ambition and effort decline. Why bust oneself striving for excellence (and risk being labeled *privileged* or *part of the problem*) when one can gain equal or more social validation by highlighting one's disadvantages or injustices suffered? Observers have described this as a **"race to the bottom"** in morality – a perverse competition to be the most aggrieved. In practical terms, grievance politics shifts the focus of institutions from rewarding *achievement* to redressing *grievances*. Universities and workplaces may become more concerned with not offending anyone (and quickly punishing any perceived offender) than with fostering achievement and excellence. The moral authority of the **victim** can even be weaponized cynically: recent psychological research found that individuals with "Dark Triad" personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) often *signal victimhood and virtue* strategically to extract resources or avoid blame. In other words, **false or exaggerated victimhood** claims can be a manipulative ploy – yet they thrive in a culture that unquestioningly rewards the victim role.

It is important to note that *genuine* compassion for victims of injustice is a hallmark of any decent society. The problem arises when victimhood is **romanticized and incentivized** to the point of **"veneration of weakness."** This term echoes philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's scathing description of "slave morality," which he argued **"condemns the strength"** of the powerful and *"praises the weakness"* of the downtrodden. Nietzsche traced how, in a masterful *"transvaluation of values,"* the once-admired traits of the strong (their power, pride, excellence) were branded as evil, while the traits of the weak (meekness, humility, suffering) were crowned as *good*. The modern cultural elevation of victimhood has strong parallels to this inversion. Being *oppressed* (or claiming to be) is often equated with being righteous, while those who are successful or privileged are presumed morally suspect. As one commentator summarized, *"the slave morality is sour grapes made into a value system"* – a psychology of ressentiment that says, "Whatever I have been unable to achieve or obtain, I will now frame as something not worth having or outright evil." When this mentality suffuses politics, it produces **policies and rhetoric driven by resentment** rather than aspiration. Public debate centers on which group can claim greater victim status, rather than how to empower individuals to excel and contribute. The notion of *personal responsibility* often gets derided as insensitivity, and the celebration of *achievement* is tempered by reflexive reminders of "check your privilege."

## Envy, Equality, and the War on Excellence

One of the most corrosive aspects of the current zeitgeist is a growing **enmity toward excellence** itself, fueled by a radicalized notion of "equality" and "fairness." In principle, *equality* in a free society means equality of rights and opportunity – it does not mean everyone will achieve the same outcomes. However, a strain of thought today equates **fairness with sameness**, seeing any disparity in outcomes as proof of injustice. This mentality can curdle into what's known as the **Tall Poppy Syndrome** – a social phenomenon (named after a Roman legend) where people "criticize, attack, or resent someone due to their success," essentially *"cutting down"* those who stand out. The term originates from the story of **Tarquin the Proud**, a tyrannical king of ancient Rome, who wordlessly instructed his son to behead the tallest poppies in his garden – a metaphor for eliminating individuals who rose above the rest. In modern usage, tall poppy syndrome denotes a cultural impulse to *level down*: when someone achieves great success, others feel an

“uneasy sense of fairness” violated and seek to knock the achiever off their pedestal. As the Australian scholar Duc Anh Bui put it, *“It’s envy, mixed with a sense of fairness… left unchecked, it becomes a cultural habit – cutting people down simply for standing out.”*

Such envy-driven leveling is **toxic to meritocracy**. It punishes the very people who *should* be held up as examples – the innovators, the hard workers, the talented – simply because their success might bruise others’ egos. Sociologists note that societies particularly prone to egalitarian envy (such as, historically, Australia or Japan with proverbs about nails and tall trees) cultivate an attitude that *“no one is better than anyone else”* and discomfort with anyone who “seeks status or stands out”. This ethos goes beyond valuing humility – it crosses into **resentment of achievement**. The **redefinition of “privilege”** in social discourse contributes to this climate. *Privilege* in its new usage doesn’t just mean unearned advantage; it often carries a pejorative connotation implying guilt. If a person is **successful**, the reflex is to attribute it to unfair privilege or luck, thus *invalidating their merit*. For instance, one common trope is, “You didn’t build that,” suggesting that individual accomplishment is a myth and only social structures matter. While it’s true that no one succeeds entirely alone, the extreme form of this argument negates individual effort and talent altogether.

In education and child-rearing, we see manifestations of this “fairness” fetish in the move to **eliminate markers of individual excellence** for fear of hurting others’ feelings. Some schools have stopped naming valedictorians or ranking students, arguing it makes others feel bad or “labels” the less-academic unfairly. In 2019, a North Carolina school district drew attention (and controversy) for eliminating the valedictorian honor; critics like commentator Rush Limbaugh lambasted it as a policy to “punish achievement” and “dumb everybody down” in the name of not upsetting anyone. Instead of healthy competition spurring all students to work harder, the impulse was to **abolish competition**. Similarly, youth sports leagues sometimes stop keeping score or give every child a trophy – sending the message that *nobody should excel above others*. These well-intentioned changes, aimed at inclusivity, inadvertently send a dangerous signal: *striving to be the best is suspect*, and mediocrity will be rewarded just the same. Over time this can foster **learned helplessness** and discourage the pursuit of mastery.

Alexis de Tocqueville, observing America in the 1830s, warned of this very tendency. He noted that Americans loved equality so much that “they would rather be equal in **slavery** than unequal in **freedom**” [1]. In other words, people might accept a lower overall condition for all – even a kind of *soft tyranny* – if only to ensure nobody has more than anybody else. Tocqueville feared that this “ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible” passion for equality could override the love of liberty and excellence. The modern glorification of equality-of-outcome at all costs, **“fairness” defined as uniformity**, bears out Tocqueville’s concern. Under the banner of **“equity”**, we increasingly see proposals to **handicap the successful** (through punitive taxes or quotas) and boost the less successful *regardless of merit*. Kurt Vonnegut’s famous dystopian story **“Harrison Bergeron”** satirized exactly this scenario: a future America where the Constitution is amended to enforce total equality, and anyone with above-average talents is weighed down with literal handicaps – weights on the strong, earpiece noise to disrupt the intelligent, masks on the beautiful – so that *“no one is better-looking or more physically able than anyone else”*. Vonnegut intended it as dark comedy, but it resonates uncomfortably with certain real attitudes today. When success is routinely stigmatized as “privilege” and efforts to excel are met with suspicion or scorn, we edge closer to a Harrison Bergeron world – a world of enforced mediocrity masquerading as justice.

## Reclaiming True Fairness: Meritocracy with Compassion

It is crucial to recognize that the **erosion of meritocracy** through virtue signaling, grievance culture, and envy-based leveling is *not* a formula for a healthy society. A culture that **venerates weakness and victimhood** while *denigrating strength and success* ends up producing the very opposite of progress: it creates a race to the bottom, a "celebration of inadequacy" in which nobody is inspired to rise above the average. This is **neither truly fair nor truly compassionate**. Protecting the vulnerable and addressing genuine injustice are moral imperatives, but *elevating the status of victimhood to a sacred untouchable category* only encourages false victims and cynicism. Likewise, striving for universal dignity is noble, but *insisting on equal outcomes by tearing down high achievers* is an "illusory and caustic" pursuit of equality – *illusory* because it mistakes leveling for fairness, and *caustic* because it breeds resentment and stagnation.

True **fairness** is not about making everyone the same; it is about giving everyone a fair chance to become *exceptional in their own way*, and *honoring those who succeed* through honest effort or great talent. In a meritocratic system tempered by humane values, we can acknowledge that not everyone has equal abilities or will achieve equal results – and *still ensure that everyone is treated with respect and given opportunity*. The goal should be to **lift up those at the bottom** (through education, economic opportunity, and removal of unfair barriers) *without tearing down the top out of spite*. Envy is a natural human emotion ("the uneasy feeling when someone else's success makes us question our own standing" as one account described it), but a healthy culture channels envy into *emulation* – motivating us to improve ourselves – rather than destructive leveling.

History and philosophy teach that a society declines when it starts punishing excellence and rewarding self-pity. As Nietzsche pointed out, making a **virtue of weakness** can only go so far before it "prevents the strong-willed from reaching their full potentialities". The challenge, then, is to **reaffirm a balanced ethos**: one that encourages **vigor, success, and excellence** as worthy goals, while also cultivating **charity, humility, and empathy**. Meritocracy need not be heartless – a meritocratic society can and should have a safety net and compassion for those who falter. But compassion should not transmute into a fetishization of failure or a hostility to triumph. If we continue down a path where every form of achievement is viewed with suspicion (or attributed solely to unfair privilege), we risk a self-fulfilling prophecy of mediocrity. Incentives to innovate or excel will weaken; cynicism and resentment will dominate public life; and in the end, *actual injustice will grow*, not diminish, because a society that abandons excellence cannot long remain prosperous or free.

In conclusion, **meritocracy** – the principle of rewarding merit – has deep roots in human ideals of justice. It is not a perfect system, but as Winston Churchill might have quipped, it is better than any obvious alternative. The modern backlash that elevates *virtue signaling over virtue, victimhood over achievement, and leveling over excellence* is a regression masquerading as progress. It threatens to unravel the hard-won gains of societies that, however imperfectly, recognized the importance of *both* equality **and** excellence. The way forward is not to reject meritocracy, but to **revitalize it**: to ensure that our systems of education, employment, and social reward truly allow talent from all quarters to shine – and to celebrate that shining rather than dimming it. A just society gives **everyone** the chance to be a "tall poppy" through their own merit, and instead of cutting them down, *inspires the rest to grow taller*. Only by reclaiming that spirit can we escape the dead-end of envious egalitarianism and continue humanity's long, uneven march toward a better, more **excellent** world.

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- Competitive victimhood and identity-based moral worth
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- Examples of leveling in schools (valedictorian removal)
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