# First Prompt

**First, please answer the following question in no more than 250 words:**

**In any analysis of an author’s argument, you will need to be able to attend closely to important moments of evidence, explain them in your own words, and also explain their meaning to the larger argument. In addition to your full essay about Sandel’s argument that you will enter into the second text box below, in this first text box please explain and analyze the following key sentence from Sandel’s argument:**

**“Meritocracy today functions less as an alternative to inequality than as its primary justification." (4)**

Meritocracy, Sandel claims, is built on the argument that “if everyone starts out with an equal chance, then those who succeed deserve the rewards their talents bring” (4). Although meritocracy sounds ideal for American society because it shares its values–it rewards talent and hard work–in practice it has its downsides. Meritocratic thinking leads people to believe that the currently successful deserve to be where they are, as do the unsuccessful (Sandel 4).

Current American society is plagued with inequality, including access to health and education. As a response to workers angry about the increasing inequality and the meager wages when compared to the country's elite, the government has pushed college as a vehicle for social mobility in the modern economy but has not addressed the root causes of inequality (Sandel 7).

The government in power over the last three decades has implemented programs that make it easier to access a college education (Sandel 7), but in the process, it have simultaneously neglected the essential trades and service jobs that do not require a college education, as well as the lower class, that will not be able to attend, even with government programs.

By offering the middle class a way to climb up the ladder but failing to address the wages and dignity of non-college-educated workers, and driving the meritocratic narrative that everyone deserves to be where they currently are, they have created a vicious cycle that widens the gap between the credentialed and the non-credentialed and keeps inequality high.

Sandel, Michael J. “How Meritocracy Fuels Inequality—Part I The Tyranny of Merit: An

Overview.” American Journal of Law and Equality, vol. 1, 2021, pp. 4–14,

https://doi.org/10.1162/ajle\_a\_00024. Accessed 15 May 2022.

# Second Prompt

## Sandel’s Argument

### Thesis

**Meritocracy:** A social system where people compete for “jobs and social roles based on their own merits” (Sandel 4).

**Meritocratic hubris:** The arrogance stemming from the meritocratic narrative about self-determination (Sandel 5). People who have become successful in a society that claims to be meritocratic will see their success as purely their own and consequently look down on those less successful than themselves.

**Working-class jobs:** Manual labor, service industry, and clerical jobs (Sandel 10).

**Essential workers:** The backbone workers that Sandel claims are being treated unfairly by not giving them enough respect and decent pay (Sandel 12).

Sandel claims that even though a meritocracy, in theory, would reduce inequality and bring about a more egalitarian society, because of the current socio-economic conformation of the Unites States, the meritocratic narrative does more to preserve inequality than it does to get rid of it. As an alternative he proposes reconfiguring the economy so that pay and respect are in line with what he claims society actually values.

### My Thesis

### Main Points

### Conclusion

## Essay

Growing up we were told that our talent and hard work would determine our success; that our potential had no bounds if we were willing to put in the effort. In his essay, “How Meritocracy Fuels Inequality—Part I The Tyranny of Merit: An Overview”, Michael J. Sandel battles that notion and claims that our society, even though it claims to be meritocratic, does more to preserve inequality than it does to get rid of it. This is caused, he holds, by the current socio-economic conformation of the United States. As an alternative, he proposes reconfiguring the economy so that pay and respect are in line with what he claims society actually values.

While Sandel makes good arguments about the nature of meritocracy in America, the logic he uses to analyze his data and draw conclusions has gaps and sometimes appears to be at odds with his postulates or his previous statements. He also seems too ingrained in the current workings of society to be to provide innovative long-term solutions for a capitalistic America.

In the beginning, Sandel introduces the concept of “meritocratic hubris” (5). He defines it as arrogance stemming from the meritocratic narrative about self-determination. People who have become successful in a society that claims to be meritocratic will see their success as purely their own and consequently look down on those less successful than themselves.

He claims that because of it, America’s elite, who are largely college-educated, have over-valorized college degrees and by failing to connect with people, they have missed the “hubris [...] and the harsh judgment” a meritocracy imposes on those who have not gone to college (Sandel 7). On page 9, he claims that the mobility vehicle proposed by elites as a solution cannot compensate for inequality, but fails to provide a reason for which this is true. He explains how college provides a disproportionate improvement in quality of life and income for those students that come from working-class families when compared to students from rich families (Sandel 10). If this were the case, then it would stand to reason that if somehow college was accessible to all, then the people in low-income families will increase their quality of life faster than the high-income students will, producing a future society where the gap between the high-income and the low-income families is much lower.

As an alternative to a strong push for college education, Sandel maintains that “we should focus less on arming people for meritocratic competition and more on affirming the dignity of work” (9). While in a complete vacuum, this proposal seems to make sense, he fails to connect it with the global economic context in which the United States resides. A context that he acknowledges when talking about job outsourcing (Sandel 7).

The United States enjoys very high standards of living when compared to the rest of the world. It becomes especially apparent with working-class jobs (manual labor, service industry, and clerical jobs (Sandel 10)), which even though are not paid as well as professional jobs, they are still paid considerably more than in other countries. The notion that a grocery store bagger in India or Argentina could purchase a car or an iPhone is ridiculous but seen every day in America.

Sandel fails to acknowledge that the reason why the standard of living is so high in the US is that it is an industrialized country that exports all sorts of advanced goods and services. These industries are made possible by millions of college-educated individuals that have developed the intelectual property behind these items.

While he asserts that America should “invest far more in forms of learning that most people rely upon to prepare themselves for the world of work” (Sandel 10), like state and community colleges, he ultimately believes that the solution is an interventionist and protectionist political agenda that decreases the role finance has in the economy, subsidizes low-paid jobs and reconfigures the tax structure so that it expresses “society’s judgment” of what work is more valuable (Sandel 14).

Hoever, Sandel does not explain why it is that society’s judgement is not currently at play in today’s wages. In America’s capitalistic society, every single memeber sets the bar of which price they are willing to pay for each product or service. By doing that, they have essentialy set the wage of the individuals that produce the goods.

When hinting at unfariness on behalf big corporations “outsourcing [...] jobs to low-wage countries” (Sandel 7) he omits that this behaviour goes in line with an egalitarian society and meritocratic belief.

If a manager at a tech company was hiring programmers and out of his two options, one of which charges $10 per hour and other one $5, he chose the more expensive option, people would accuse him of nepotism or discrimination. Following the basis of an egalitarian society Sandel put forward, the cheaper programmer should be chosen since he is able to produce the same output at a much lower cost. Now, if the same situation occurs but the more expensive programer is American while the cheaper one is Indian, why should the cheaper one not be chosen? Sandel contradicts himself by stating that people should be able to “compete for desirable jobs [...] based on their own merits” but then hinting that outsourcing of jobs to low-wage countries is unfair and encouraging domestic manufacturing (Sandel 13).

His proposal for improving the country goes against the meritocratic beliefs he puts forward in the introduction of his essay and also fails to adapt to an extremely capitalistic society that looks down on any kind of government intervention, especially if it means raising taxes. Throughout his paper Sandel presents relevant information about the United States but does not fully connect it with American beliefs and his own egalitarian beliefs, resulting in conclusions and plans that will have a hard time gaining traction and likely fail at reducing the inequality gap he so desperatly wants to close.

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## Research

Thesis: He fails to recognize the dignity of the people whose jobs are being transferred to. Within this context, it is the lower American class that does not possess the knowldege required to mantain the standard of living of the place where they currently reside. To address this, it is better not to artifically make it so that they can keep the lives they have, but to provide them the tools to compete on the global economy and provide enough value to the world to maintain a decent standard of living wherever it is that they reside. A good way to achieve this is by providing accessible education to every person that wants it.

He brings good points to the table, but takes away the wrong conclusion. He fails to take into account the nature of the capitalistic system the American economy is based on, and provides solutions that do not address the problem long term in a manner that remains egalitarian (Sandel 12, first highlighted blurb) -> If college was accessible to all, higher paid jobs that require a degree will be higher paid since they require more work, but anyone can access them because education is free. If you just artifically raise the pay of essential workers (which have arbitrarily defined by the constraints of this pandemic - if we had been at war the essential workers would be completely different), then everyone will have a respectable wage (good), but the egalitarian principle of “what you get what you put in would be lost”, since the people that put the extra effort to go to college will be making similar wages to the people that haven’t..

### Sandel’s Argument

1. Basis of meritocracy: If everyone starts out with an equal chance, then those who succeed deserve the rewards their talents bring.
2. Three objections to the fundamentals of meritocracy:
   1. First, having the talents that enable me to get ahead is not my doing; it is my good fortune.
   2. Second, that I live in a society that happens to prize the talents I happen to have is also a matter of luck.
   3. To these two objections, I add a third–about the attitudes toward success that meritocratic societies promote. Those who land on top come to believe that their success is their own doing, the measure of their merit, and that those who lose out must deserve their fate as well.
      1. This way of thinking brings out the dark side of meritocracy. It leads to what I cann “meritocratic hubris”–the tendency of the successful to inhale too deeply of their success and to look down on those less successful than themselves.
         1. My opinion: This is only the case if we teach that our position in life comes purely from our ability and hard work. Were we to be taught as children that where we end up is a function of ability, hard work, AND where we started (what our parents gave us) and luck (we might win the lottery), people, even the hard workers, will be more understanding and compassionate toward the people that have less.
         2. If someone were to win the lottery (an believe they did so because of luck) they would be more willing to share the winnings with someone that lost compared to someone that won a money prize by completing an exam (believing that his performance was completely tied to his hard work and ability).
      2. Such hubris is not only morally unattractive; it also deepens the divide between winners and losers and is corrosive of the common good.
3. Talking of Michael Young’s case: But if he is right, the attitudes toward success that meritocracies produce make it hard to redress inequalities of income and wealth through redistribution. For the more confident we are that market outcomes track moral desert, the more powerful the presumption that income and wealth should lie where they fall.
4. Meritocracy as a political project found expression in the familiar slogan that everyone should be able to rise “as far as their efforts and talent will take them.”
5. But despite its seemingly egalitarian bent, the rhetoric of rising entrenched rather than challenged inequalities of income and wealth. It did not propose to alleviate these inequalities by reconsidering the economic policies that produced them. Instead it offered a work-around: individual upward mobility through higher education.
   1. My opinion: We are talking about deserving. It is important to note that while inequalities have increased within the US (negative), a lot of opportunities have appeared for, perhaps more capable or deserving, people in other countries that are willing to charge less.
   2. If a person in the US writes code, and they are able to write one feature per hour, and for that they charge 20 $/hr, why should a person in India, who writes the same quality code but at two features per hour and charging half, not be hired for that job. Stating that this behaviour by global companies is unfair implies that there is something better, naturally part of being American, that makes it so that they are the deserving ones of that job. It would be a form of hidden want of nepotism for the fact that the hiring manager and the programmer both are American.
   3. GIVE EXAMPLE OF TWO AMERICANS WITH DIFFERENT ABILITY AND AMERICAN AND AN INDIAN WITH DIFFERENT ABILITY TO TALK ABOUT THE IMPLICIT HIGH REGARD FOR AMERICANS.
6. The elites who delivered this message failed to see the implicit insult it conveyed: if you did not go to college, and if you are not flourishing in the new economy, your failure must be your fault.
   1. My opinion: It’s not an insult. If they are less capable or they provide worse service than foreign counterparts, why are they the diserving ones. American inequality is often analyzed without looking at the broader flobal inequality.
7. Elites have so valorized a college degree–both as an avenue for advancement and as the basis for social esteem–that they have difficulty understanding the hubris a meritocracy can generate and the harsh judgment it imposes on those who have not gone to college.
   1. My opinion: My argument against this argument in general is that college in the US is valued way too much and is the basis of social esteem.
   2. I don’t believe the problem to be that it is valued, since it is a hard thing to do (so it should be valued according to a meritocracy).
   3. I think the problem is that not everyone is given the same opportunity to go to college. THe fact that SAT scores grow linearly with family income, that it is expensive to apply (if you want to be competitive) and that going to university itself is extremely expensive, make it so that what family you were born into determines a big portion of your chances of attending college, which goes against the concept of meritocracy.
   4. If food, shelter and education where a guaranteed for every student that wanted it, then it would make sense that going to college was held in high esteem. It means that after finishing high school, someone decided to keep pushing themselves mentally. On top of that, it is, and would be, the people that go to college that are typically able to provide enormous amount of value to everyone in society through research.
8. We should begin by acknowledging that mobility cannot compensate for inequality. Any serious response to the gap between the rich and the rest must reckon directly with inequalities of power and wealth, rather than rest content with the project of helping people scramble up a ladder whose rungs grow farther and garther apart.
9. This requires shifting the terms of public discourse. Broadly speaking, we should focus less on arming people for meritocratic competition and more on affirming the dignity of work.
   1. My opinion: I agree with THE GREEN PART, but disagree with his conclusion. We should teach that every job is respectable, but it follows the egalitarian principles of meritocracy that people who have put in more effort to obtain a better job, position, etc. be held in higher regard. I believe the conclusion from the data he has presented has to be that we should make the requirements for getting any job accessible to all.
10. Affluent parents have figured out how to pass their privilege on to their children–not by bequeathing them vast estates, but by equiping them to compete in the meritocratic tournament and to win admission to top colleges and universities. SAT scores are closely correlated with family income.
11. Higher education is like an elevator in a building that most people enter on the top floor.
    1. My opinion: It is important to note that while most of the people at top colleges are rich, it is the poor that have the most to benefit from university.
    2. Something to also consider is that a lot of people will look at top colleges when making their analysis, but we should not be focused on these. Instead, we should be focused on providing accessible education to the masses.
12. We should invest far more than we do in those forms of learning that most people rely upon to prepare themselves for the world of work–state colleges, two-year community colleges, and vocational technical training.
13. One consequence of the credentialist tide is that the working class is now virtually absent from representative government. In the United States, about half of the labor force is employed in working-class jobs, defined as manual labor, service industry and clerical jobs.
    1. My opinion: There is more to be researched here. There are other reasons why this could be the case other than a credentialist tide. A potential hypothetical example is the following: it could be assumed that people that run for representative government come from relatively wealthy families that can afford to maintain them while they run for office, or during their early career they have earned a salary large enough that allows them to not work while they run (more likely to get a high paying job if you get a college degree). The relative increase in college prices during the past decades (when compared to median wages) could have made it so that it is people from richer families that can afford to go to college and then also have enough money to run for office (as opposed to have to use their income to pay back loans).
    2. This provides a possible alternative explanation to the credentialist tide for the increase in credentialed members in representative government. If this were true, it would reinforce the previously stated need of making state colleges, community colleges, and vocational training cheaper/free and available to all.
14. It tells them that the work they do, less valued by the market than the work of well-paid professionals, is a lesser contribution to the common good and so less worthy of social recognition and esteem.
    1. My opinion: Something I disagree with here is that what the market “values” (as measured by wages) is different from what people hold in high esteem.
    2. Non-profit work is probably some of the work held in the highest regard, yet it often reaps very small monetary rewards.
    3. Trash collectors are often held in very low esteem, yet they earn great wages when compared to other jobs.
15. But over the last several decades, the idea that the money people make is the measure of thei contribution to the common good has become deeply embedded.
    1. My opinion: That is a purely American notion that stems from the Protestant work culture.
16. Those of us with the luxury of working from home during the pandemic have come to recognize how deeply we depend on workers we often overlook–delivery workers, warehouse workers, supermarket cashiers and grocery store clerks, utility workers, nurse assistants, childcare workers, hame care providers. These are not the best paid nor the most honored workers in our society. But now we see them as “essential workers.” This could be the moment for a public debate about how to reconfigure the economy to bring their pay and recognition into better alignment with the importance of their work. ADDRESSED AT THE END OF MY THESIS.
17. Such deliberation would carry us beyond debates about distributive justice (how to distribute income, opportunity, and the good things in life) to debates about contributive justice (how to create conditions that enable everyone to contribute to the common good and to receive honor and recognition for having done so).
    1. My solution still hold with this. By giving everyone the opportunity of taking on whatever job they please, they still allow everyone to contribute.
18. Policy proposals to increase the purchasing power of working- and middle-class families, or to shore up the safety net, important though they are, will not by themselves address the anger and resentment that now runs deep. This is because the injury that most animates the grievance of working people is to their status as producers.
    1. My opinion: This runs contrary to point 16 since it is precisely saying that the measures to increase income proposed in point 16 will not work.
    2. I agree with what is said in point 18, but I read it as more of a support to my theory than something more that raising wages has to be done.
19. They come instead from “dignified employment at decent pay,” the kind of employment that enables us to say, “I helped build this country. I am a participant in its great public ventures.”
    1. My opinion: I think he fails to explain why respect has to be correlated to pay. One is related to your ability to produce value in a capitalistic system. The other is tied to the intrinsic desert everyone has by providing any sort of value to society.
20. Encourage the domestic manufacture of certain goods (beginning with surgical masks, medical gear, and pharmaceuticals) rather than promote outsorcing to low-wage countries;
    1. My opinion: Why is that more fair. How is this different from nepotism on the basis of nationality?
21. Taxing financial transactions and reducing payroll taxes would not only make the tax system more progressive, it would express society’s judgement that work ismore valuable than casino-like speculation.
    1. My opinion: An objection would be that Sandel asks for pay that rewards the same activities that “society values” but doesn’t propose a change to the fundamental economic system. In a capitalistic society, pay is determined by market equilibriums. Why does the current pay not represent what “society values” if it is every member of society that, through their behaviour, has set the price of a good or service that they want to consume. These prices flow upwards to the workers involved in producing those goods and services.
22. Meritocratic sorting taught us that our success is our own doing, and so eroded our sense of indebtedness. We are now in the midst of the angry whirlwind this unraveling has produced. To renew our civic life, we must repair the social bonds the age of merit has undone.
    1. My opinion: I agree that the sense that success is our own doing has eorded our sense of indebtedness, but I believe that an education focused on respect and value of all people, coupld with accessible routes to any profession one desires is a better way for everyone in society to obtain the respect that they deserve than alterin economic incentives so that blue collar workers are paid more. I don’t believe it is a wrong thing to do, just that it will not fix the current meritocratic hubris. In fact, it might generate a greater divide if a higher entity (e.g., the government) forces credentialed workers to pay higher taxes to subsidize the wages of workers that–in their eyes–don’t deserve it.
    2. If we first teach respect for everyone, when those people grow up, they will eventually change the system so that the financial incentives align with their moral values.